

tell me a piece of your history by kitschvanitas

Category: IT (2017), IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King

Genre: Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Amnesia, Angst, Canon Has Been Stripped Down And Mined For Parts, Canon-Typical Violence, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, M/M, Period-Typical Homophobia, Slow Burn

Language: English

Characters: Eddie Kaspbrak, Richie Tozier, Stanley Uris, The Losers Club (IT)

Relationships: Eddie Kaspbrak & Richie Tozier, Eddie Kaspbrak & Stanley Uris, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier, Richie Tozier & Stanley Uris

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2019-09-10

Updated: 2019-12-12

Packaged: 2019-12-12 04:13:53

Rating: Explicit

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 18

Words: 71,473

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Eddie Kaspbrak and Richie Tozier run into each other after leaving Derry and start to remember.

"Eddie Spaghetti!"

Eddie just stands there, open mouthed. He's sure he doesn't know this person, and he's sure that there's no one who's ever called him Eddie Spaghetti. He stares at the guy, about his age, tall and gangly, with longish curly black hair, huge glasses, and a crooked smile. "I'm sorry, I don't..."

"I'm Richie. Richie Tozier. We used to go to middle school together, didn't we? About a million years ago?"

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

this all started as an experiment to see if i could do an impression of a white dude comedian and then Chapter Two gave me a truly rude amount of emotions. and now here we are.

Eddie Kaspbrak's dorm room is a tiny airless cubbyhole made out of cinderblocks, sloppily painted in institutional beige. The window is too rusty to open all the way, and the baking Midwest heat has settled in the room for good.

But Eddie feels for the first time that he can really breathe.

He quickly sets to making his side of the room really his— tacking up an X-Files poster, a Starfleet pennant, a map of the stars he's had since before he can remember.

He settles back on his bed and looks up at the empty wall.

Well. There'll be time, right?

His roommate doesn't show up until Sunday and vanishes immediately thereafter. Eddie gets used to a peculiar kind of solitude. He has the people that he knows through class and review groups, and the familiar faces of his hall mates and his resident advisor.

But when Friday nights roll around, he's inevitably alone in his room, watching Star Trek reruns on his roommate's TV while he reviews his notes and outlines papers, or doing his laundry as he watches people laugh and walk by on their way out.

He makes all As on his midterms.

His mother wants to know when he'll be home.

Instead of answering the question, Eddie signs up to stay over Thanksgiving break.

Campus is nearly empty, all the lights off in the buildings, the quad deserted. He thought that he would like this, really. The dorms are all so loud, the quiet would help him study, stay on top so he can be ready for the rest of the semester. Maybe he can make the dean's list this semester.

Instead, he only feels more restless and alone.

The dining halls and union coffee shop are all locked up for the break, so he wanders off campus, to the first place with the lights on.

It's a dingy little café that reeks of burned coffee, but it's not empty, so he ducks inside. The guy behind the counter has his back turned to him, too busy fiddling with something out of sight. Eddie waits patiently for him to finish, staring up at the board as if he's going to get anything but a cup of black coffee.

The guy behind the counter turns from fiddling with the radio. For a moment, his brow furrows, like he's trying to figure out some kind of puzzle, until his face lights up with a delighted and surprised grin. "Eddie Spaghetti!"

Eddie just stands there, open mouthed. He's sure he doesn't know this person, and he's sure that there's no one who's ever called him Eddie Spaghetti. He stares at the guy, about his age, tall and gangly, with longish curly black hair, huge glasses, and a crooked smile. "I'm sorry, I don't..."

"I'm Richie. Richie Tozier. We used to go to middle school together, didn't we? About a million years ago?"

Eddie is about to shake his head, say *no, you must have me mixed up with someone else, sorry* when he brushes up against a sharp fragment of memory.

Come on, Eddie Spaghetti, hurry it up! You wanna die of old age before we make it to the movies?

"You... we snuck into the movies once, didn't we?"

Richie grins again. "Yeah. One of the Elm Streets. Your mom woulda shit if she knew. She thought we were going to see Indiana fuckin'

Jones.”

“You always hated him,” Eddie says, before the fragment of memory disappears. “I didn’t realize you went to school here.”

“I don’t, that’s for smart kids. I work at this shithole and save for a bus ticket. What’ll it be?”

“Uh... a black coffee.”

“You gotta get something to eat too, you look like a fuckin’ skeleton.”

Eddie glances over to the case of baked goods, none of which really appeal to him. “Uh... cheese danish.”

“You don’t want a cheese danish, those are shit. I should know, I make em. Get a muffin instead, we buy those in bulk and all I do is defrost em.”

“Uh... a muffin, then.”

“Great choice, my friend. So what are you studying?”

“I’m pre-med,” Eddie says with a small, proud smile.

Richie hands him a coffee, mouth now open in delight. “No shit! That’s awesome, man, good for you. You got an apartment near here?”

“No, I’m staying in the dorms over the break. Cheaper than flying home, you know?”

“To Derry?”

Eddie shakes his head, sipping his coffee. “No, no. My mom had family out in Queens, so we stayed there after eighth grade.”

“I thought you just ditched me for the other smart kids. I hung on til about tenth grade. Then my parents split, and Dad dragged me off to Vermont,” Richie says, audible disgust in his voice. “Staying out in his fuckin’ he-man divorce cabin... and all those fuckin’ *trees!*”

Eddie laughs, taking a bite of his muffin. "What do you have against trees, Richie?"

Richie heaves a dramatic sigh and shoots Eddie a sidelong glance. "Now don't tell me you're a tree fucker too."

"A what?"

"A tree fucker. Y'know, someone who wears Birkenstocks, shits granola, and fucks trees." Richie vaults himself onto the countertop and settles like he belongs there. "That bit kills with all the drunk college Republicans, I'll have you know."

"I'm not any of those things."

"Like I said, you're one of the smart kids." Richie sighs and leans back against the metal side of the cabinet. "Hop up here," he says, patting the stretch of counter beside him. "It's comfier than any of the chairs, and I can guarantee nobody puked on this. At least not during my shifts."

"You're not gonna get in trouble for this, are you?"

"Me? Nah. Don't worry about it, Eds. Just means I gotta actually clean the counter before I close down."

Eddie laughs and sips his coffee. Richie keeps talking a mile a minute, and there's really not a lot for him to do but laugh—the real kind, not the kind he fakes so no one notices he's out of place. His sides are actually hurting by the time he gets a chance to ask Richie a question. "So do you go to BG, then?"

Richie shoots him a mock disgusted look over the top of the baking sheet he's ostensibly cleaning. "Out in the fuckin' prairie? Jesus, Eds, I thought you liked me. Besides, I told you— college is a smart kid's game."

"So... what do you do?"

"I work here. And I price bus tickets to Chicago or New York. I bus tables at this other place, they do a comedy night, and sometimes the guys let me do a set before the real shit starts."

“When?”

“What do you mean ‘when,’ it’s just when they need filler. It’s not like, set in stone. I’m what they call a pinch hitter,” Richie says, swinging a rolling pin like a baseball bat before he puts it away.

“You hate baseball,” Eddie says, without knowing why he knows it.

“Well, if hockey had a decent metaphor I’d use it, wouldn’t I? Asshole. Would you look at that, it’s closing time.”

Eddie glances down at his watch. It’s barely 6:30, far from even being dark. “Really?”

“Yeah, really. Costs more to keep the lights on without bringing any money. Come on. Nobody here but us chickens,” he says, shrugging casually into an old leather motorcycle jacket. “Let’s head back to yours?”

Eddie’s brain shorts out for a moment. “W-what?”

“Your place. I always wanted to see where you college kids hang out.”

“It’s... it’s really not much. Just a dorm.”

“So let’s go. Not like it’s far.” Richie grins at him, and Eddie rolls his eyes.

“I thought you said you had a place.”

He waves one hand dismissively as he slings the duffel bag he grabs from under the counter. “Eh, sort of. The night manager lets me sleep on his couch. I’m getting money together for a place. Hasn’t happened just yet. Lead the way, maestro.”

Halfway up the stairs to the dorm, Eddie notices how the bag settles on Richie’s shoulders, like it’s heavy. Like almost everything he owns might be in that bag.

Another fragment of memory splinters off, like a paint flaking off a hastily painted white wall— *a skinny boy in thick glasses, goofing off*

with a tuba that wasn't his in the middle of a street he thought he owned.

"Jesus Christ, Eddie! If this place was any smaller, it'd be a hamster cage."

"It's not that bad."

"I'm serious, Eddie. Legally a hamster cage." That being said, Richie still doesn't hesitate to flop down on Eddie's bed, casually kicking his feet up.

"That could be my roommate's bed, you know."

Richie lifts his head for a moment, cocking one eyebrow up. "On this side? With all the nerd shit on it?" he says, gesturing to the posters.

Eddie lets out a disgusted sigh and goes to his desk. He pulls out a book, almost out of habit, before remembering that there's someone else with him.

"So. You're gonna be a doctor, huh?"

"That's the plan."

"What made you wanna do that?"

Eddie shrugs. "I like helping people. Turns out I'm okay at it."

"You helped this kid we used to know. He got whaled on by some assholes at school. You stitched him up."

Eddie is about to shake his head no, but there is that faint ghost of a memory, of carefully applying bandages in bright summer sunlight. "I didn't stitch him up, Richie, I was like, twelve."

"Well, I thought you were the next Dr. Quinn. Probably called you that too."

"I don't remember."

Richie shrugs. "Me neither. It was forever ago. Who even remembers shit that far back?"

Eddie smiles, but doesn't say anything. Richie sounds like he's trying to convince himself. The way Eddie does, when he tries to convince himself that other people are missing whole swathes of their pasts. Richie seems uncomfortable in the silence and immediately launches into some comic tirade riffing on Star Trek, leaving Eddie flailing to defend his show even as he laughs.

Sometime after midnight, as Eddie starts to drift off, he hears the faint rustle of nylon as Richie unfurls a sleeping bag.

In the morning, he's gone. But he leaves a muffin on Eddie's desk, hastily wrapped in a napkin.



Eddie makes a habit out of going to that coffee shop. The coffee is garbage, and the food is worse, but it's dirt cheap. Richie usually sneaks him a free muffin if his manager isn't around. And he fills the air with a constant patter that Eddie finds strangely comforting. He doesn't have to say anything, but Richie keeps on talking enough for both of them. Memories, jokes, rants about idiot customers... anything to fill the coffee shop to the rafters with sound.

In early December, Richie appears from behind the counter, looking as exhausted as any of the students. "You okay?"

Richie shrugs. "Been better. Been worse, probably."

"What's wrong?"

"Got the welcome mat yanked from under me."

"Shit, Richie."

"It's fine, I'll figure something out."

"You could stay in my room. My roommate, he got a girlfriend, so he's never there. He doesn't even keep his clothes there." Eddie is shocked to hear the words come out of his mouth. More shocked to find that he means them.

“What, you're not gonna try and move your girlfriend in?”

Eddie rolls his eyes. “I don't have time for a girlfriend, Richie.”

“Nah, I'm sure you could pencil something in, lemme see your agenda,” Richie says, making a big show out of reaching for the spiral bound notebook on top of Eddie's stack. But Eddie puts his hand on the cover of the book before Richie can start thumbing through the pages and cracking jokes-- *you really scheduled a time to take a shower, Jesus Christ, Eddie Spaghetti, just stand in the rain like the rest of us--* and looks up at Richie. He really notes for the first time the deep, dark bags under Richie's eyes, the fingernails chewed down as far as they'll go.

He didn't always chew his nails, did he? But Eddie waves that thought away.

“Richie. Where are you gonna stay?”

“I'll figure something out, don't worry about me--”

“Okay, well, figure it out in my dorm. You shouldn't be sleeping in your car, it's cold out, you'll get frostbite.”

Richie laughs, shaking his head. “You think I can afford a car, that's adorable.”

“Richie, I'm serious.”

“Okay, fine. I'll stay tonight. And I owe you one--”

“Don't worry about it.”

A faintly burnt smell starts to drift up from the kitchen. “What are you making?”

“Aw shit. A pure carbon, probably, if I don't hurry.”

Eddie laughs as Richie runs back to the kitchen, cursing and banging pots and pans around. He emerges a few minutes later, wiping his hands off on his dirty apron. “Well, these are fucked.”

“Hey, was that a chemistry joke?”

Richie looks up at him, one eyebrow arched up. “I don't know what they're teaching you in those classes, but I think you should ask for a refund.”

“Not that. Before. The pure carbon thing.”

“Oh, yeah. Guess you're rubbing off on me, smart kid,” he replies with a lopsided grin. Then he's off to deal with one of the shop's rare rushes of customers. It lasts almost til close, and Richie even has a half full tip jar to show for his trouble. He dumps the crumpled bills and quarters into his hoodie pocket, then reaches to grab his backpack and a duffel bag Eddie hasn't seen before out from under the counter.

“All right, let's get out of this shit hole.”

Eddie stands up and slings his backpack over his shoulder. The walk is unusually quiet, and Richie hangs back, staring around at the street, lost in thought. He doesn't say anything until they're about to pass the all-night convenience store on the edge of campus. “Hey. Hold up a second, Eds.”

“What, Richie?”

“Just... give me a second. I'll be right back.”

Eddie waits outside in the early December chill, watching the cars trickle by. The bar across the street is blasting music, and when the door swings open, he can hear the sound of laughter and happy chatter. It's probably warm in there, he thinks. It can't possibly be as hard as he thinks it is to walk into that warm yellow light and find somewhere to belong.

I belonged somewhere once, didn't I?

Another memory, this time of jumping into murky blue-green water, towards cheers below, holding tight to someone else's hand.

But he shakes his head. There's no way he'd ever do something like that.

“Fuck that place. You know they cut you off after two fishbowls? What kind of weak bullshit is that?”

Eddie looks up at him, frowning. “But we're not old enough to drink. I mean, I'm not-- neither of us should be, right?”

Richie lets out a snort of laughter, hooking an arm around Eddie's narrow shoulders. “God, you're adorable.” He looks down at Eddie, a strangely familiar warmth in his eyes. He reaches up with his other hand to brush some snow out of Eddie's hair. Then the warmth and the smile fade, and he tousles Eddie's hair instead, another gesture that feels familiar. It feels like something he should remember.

“Come on, I'm freezing my dick off, let's go.”

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

the song i listened to while writing this was "L.G.F.U.A.D." by Motion City Soundtrack, which is a great song to listen to if you'd like to be very sad about Richie Tozier.

no, i haven't updated my music tastes since 2010, why do you ask?

There is absolutely no reason for Richie to be having a crisis like this in the back of a convenience store. Absolutely none at all.

But no one told him.

He stares at the overly bright cases of beer and wine and shit he can't be bothered with categorizing at the moment. The grating buzz of the coolers is all too much for his overheated mind, and for a moment, he gives into it and leans his forehead against the cool, dirty glass.

This is fine. Everything is fine. You can keep it together for another couple of days. Until you figure something else out.

He thinks about Eddie, standing outside, bundled in that ridiculous green knit scarf and a matching hat, a backpack full of books preparing him for a better life. Eddie, who doesn't remember enough about Richie to know that inviting him to crash was a bad idea.

Eddie, who, like most people, is too good for pending trainwrecks like Richie Tozier.

He should have known better than to say anything. But the moment that guy walked into the coffee shop, with his tousled dark hair and brown eyes always shot through with some kind of worry, he recognized him.

More than that-- Richie *knew* him.

And Richie doesn't *know* people. He's built his little life in a shifting

sea of familiar strangers for as long as he can remember. People knew his name, people invited him to parties, people even called themselves his friends. But he's always made sure to keep a healthy distance between them and him. If you crack enough jokes, people learn not to dig.

And that's safe.

Richie didn't ever remember trying to be closer than that. Not until Eddie walked back in. Then, all at once, he remembered--

being twelve and gawky, sneaking in to some musty old theater through the exit door, taking hidden seats at the very back, slumped down so the ushers wouldn't see them, the smaller boy grabbing at his hand when the movie got too scary, holding him so tightly that his knuckles were white even in the flickering light, and leaning over in his seat to shelter him as much as he could from the monsters, closing his eyes and breathing in the scent of popcorn and shampoo and thinking "nothing is better than this--"

that name. Eddie Spaghetti. It sounds stupid, the kind of thing a kid thinks he's a genius for coming up with, the kind of nickname other people just grin and bear.

We know each other.

The smart thing would have been to keep his mouth shut. But no one ever accused Richie of being smart.

So he blurted out that name and hasn't shut up since then, sharing every fragment of memory that bubbles to the surface, using the ones that Eddie offers in return to fill out more lines on the map of who he really might be.

He swallows hard and grabs a bottle of cheap wine, without even really looking at it. He pays for it with some of his tips from the day--the cashier doesn't even bother to look at his clumsily faked ID, just takes the cash and keeps on watching the TV.

Eddie should at least get something for his trouble.



Richie kicks off his shoes and shrugs out of his worn and faded jacket, draping it over one of the empty desk chairs. He looks around the room as Eddie frantically tries to tidy it, stuffing dirty clothes in a hamper and corralling books in their shelves. It seems like a weird waste of effort on someone like Richie.

Without further ado, he catapults into Eddie's unmade bed, stretching out on the rumpled sheets. "Now this is luxury."

Eddie whirls around, an armful of dirty clothes in his arms. "Get out of there, I gotta change those--"

"What, you have a hot date last night?"

Eddie sighs so deeply that Richie wonders if it's possible to collapse a lung by doing that. But that seems like a question to push aside for now. "No, Richie, I just... I just haven't changed them in a while, okay?"

Richie scoffs and props himself up on one elbow to get a better look at Eddie. "What, like, a week?"

Eddie doesn't say anything, but there's a trace of red creeping into his cheeks and neck. Richie prods further. "Two weeks?"

Eddie starts to shake his head, but he catches himself. "Laundry is *expensive*," he mutters.

"So like, at least a month, right?" Richie lets out a low whistle. "Jesus, you've been livin' in fuckin' squalor since before your roommate left! What would your mom say--"

"Shut up," Eddie snaps, and there's real anger there. It startles Richie. He's wandered onto some kind of fault line he doesn't understand, and he stares up at Eddie uncertain, the smile fading off his face. This matters, and he should remember why. But today, like usual, anything farther back than high school in his treacherous brain is a flat and faded out wasteland, with one or two stolen memories standard out like old billboards on a desolate highway. "I-- sorry, Eds--"

Eddie's expression softens as he turns away, dropping the armful of

clothes in an overflowing hamper. "I know, Richie. Just... don't, okay? And move, seriously, I gotta change these."

Richie, relieved to be on safer ground, scrambles off the bed, making a great show of stretching. "Sure. What the hell's that mattress made out of anyway? Packing peanuts?"

"You were making yourself at home a second ago."

"Yeah, well, I've been sleeping on a couch that I'm pretty sure is stuffed with rocks for the past six months. One of the springs left a permanent dent in my kidney, Eds."

"That's not actually possible."

"Look, pal, who's the expert on my kidneys, you or me?"

"I'm taking an anatomy class--"

"Wow, I bet that line just kills it at the bar. I should try it-- *hey, baby, I'm taking an anatomy class*," Richie says, waggling his eyebrows and dropping his voice deep into his chest as he leans over an imaginary co-ed.

Eddie lets out another sigh, but this one carries a trace of laughter in it. He's smiling, too, when he says, "You're impossible, Richie."

Richie staggers back, clutching at his jaw like the imaginary co-ed has just hit him with a mean right hook, but he's smiling himself. Laughter always feels like a victory, no matter what he has to do to get it. "Hey, just try it, report back."

"I thought you were gonna try it."

Richie waves his hand. "Nah, I don't need any help."

"Oh really?"

"Yeah, turns out girls are so hot for a guy who smells like burned coffee and old beer all the time. And lives on his manager's couch. That's actually why I got kicked out-- he got sick of the constant piles of panties everywhere, apparently, I'm not a great roommate?"

“You're so full of shit.”

Richie shrugs, settling in one of the desk chairs and kicking his feet up again. “Hey, man, it's a rough life, being the James Bond of busing tables.” It's a better story than the slow chill that had settled all over the apartment over the past few weeks, and then finding all his shit stacked neatly on the fire escape when he got home the night before. The truth doesn't have a punchline yet.

He looks around the room, his gaze finally settling on a framed photo over the desk. There's Eddie in his black graduation, a mortarboard perched unsteadily on his head. His mother is beside him, hair frozen in beauty shop waves, dressed in a stiffly ruffled floral dress, smiling as she holds his hand. Eddie is trying to smile, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes.

Richie clears his throat and turns back to Eddie. “Hey, you said laundry's expensive, right?”

“Yeah, I just said that. Why?”

Richie reaches into his jacket and grabs the little handful of paper clips he keeps there. “Grab your stuff. I wanna show you a magic trick.”

“What?”

“C'mon! Time's a-wasting, Eddie Spaghetti!”



The dorm's basement laundry room is bigger than Eddie's cubicle, but it still has the same claustrophobic, hamster cage feel, even under the thick, warm scent of dryer sheets. Richie walks into the room, an overflowing laundry basket propped easily on his hip. He's relieved to find it empty.

Eddie trails him into the room, huffing softly as he sets the largest hamper, the one he insisted on carrying himself, on the floor. “I don't know why you made me bring everything. I told you, I only have two dollars,” he says, holding out a handful of quarters. Richie holds up a

hand to stop him. “Hey, save those quarters. I have a trick.”

Now Eddie looks wary. “Why do you have paperclips?”

“I’ll show you in a second. Load your shit.”

“If you break the machine, we’re both gonna get in trouble--”

“Jesus, Eddie, I’m not gonna break it, I know what I’m doing. C’mere,” he says, waving Eddie over. He carefully lines the unfolded paper clips up in the coin tray and pushes them forward, until there’s a loud click and the machine starts. “And voilà! You’re in business, my friend.”

“Where’d you learn to do that?”

Richie grins and winks at Eddie. “That’s for me to know, and you to never find out. Here, you try it on the next one.”

Eddie is more hesitant with the trick, and it takes Richie’s hand steady over his to make it actually work.

“I’m gonna break it--”

“You’re not gonna break it, these things are built like Fort fuckin’ Knox, Eds, you’re not gonna break anything.”

“If it’s built like Fort Knox, how come you can break into it with a bunch of paper clips?”

Richie rolls his eyes. “We’re not breaking in, we’re just... taking a short cut. There we go!”

Eddie lets an excited little whoop when the machine clicks and his sheets begin to whirl around behind its tiny window. Richie grins back, stepping away quickly to give a little bow. “You’re welcome.”

Richie settles back in the ugly orange plastic chairs, draping an arm over the back. Eddie takes a seat beside him. There’s a quiet thrill in Richie’s stomach when they’re practically touching, one he thinks he remembers. It drowns pretty quickly when Eddie pulls a textbook out of fucking nowhere. “You’re gonna study *now*?”

"What else am I gonna do? I have finals coming up."

"You study at the shop, don't you ever take a break?"

Eddie laughs. "No such thing as breaks. Not if I wanna make the dean's list. And get into med school."

"Your brain's gonna melt and pour out your ears like soup, if you don't have some fun once in a while. That's science."

"I have fun!"

Richie raises an eyebrow. "Oh yeah? When?"

Eddie's mouth opens and closes, like a fish out of water, his brow furrowed in deep thought. "I... when I hang out with you. That's fun."

"When you're studying! Doesn't count."

"Says who?"

Richie hooks one of his thumbs back at his own chest. "Says me. I'm kind of an expert."

"Richie, what are you doing here?"

His heart stalls in his chest, and he blinks quickly. "What?"

"Why are you here? I thought you said you were living out in Vermont with your dad."

"No, no, see, we're talking about your thing--"

"Richie."

He takes off his glasses so he can drag a hand over his face and through his shaggy dark hair. "Because I left."

"I could figure that out, thanks. Why?"

Was he always this stubborn? "I left before he could kick me out. Kind of like quitting before you can get fired, you know? But for your

dad.”

Eddie's voice is softer now, and his book falls shut with a soft thud. “Jesus, Richie, I'm sorry.”

Richie cleans his glasses on his shirt before putting them back on with a shrug. “It's not your fault. He's the one who decided to wait out the return policy on me, right? I bought a bus ticket for as far as I could get. I thought I had enough to get to Chicago. Turns out my math is shit.”

“So what are you gonna do?”

Richie shrugs again. “I dunno. I keep hoping someone'll pay me to tell jokes. They stopped telling me to fuck off when I get on the stage where I bus tables, so I think that's progress. Right?”

Eddie is looking at him, head tilted in concern. “Richie...”

“Don't do that. I'm fine. I'll figure it out. I always do. When I have enough money, I'm going to Chicago. See if I can make it out there. And if I can't, I can make coffee and wash dishes there too.”

Eddie doesn't say anything, just rests a hand on Richie's shoulder. They sit like that in the quiet laundry room, until the buzzer for the washer sounds. Richie jumps to life, digging those paper clips out of his pocket again and handing them to Eddie. “Here, you practice on this load. I've got the other one, okay?”

It only takes Richie a minute to get the other dryer going, and he settles on one of the unused machines nearby, watching Eddie work. Even doing this simple cheat, he's got all the intensity of a brain surgeon. Richie can already picture him in those surgical scrubs from a TV show, saving somebody's life.

He'd probably still do that little victory dance in the operating room, too. Richie doesn't know what to do with the warm smile that keeps tugging at the corner of his mouth, so he lets out a low wolf whistle.

Eddie rolls his eyes and flips him the bird. “Why are you sitting on that? There's a perfectly good chair two feet away.”

“Better vantage point.”

“For what? Making fun of me?”

“Laundry thieves, obviously.”

Eddie doesn't say anything in response, just slowly looks around the empty room, both eyebrows raised.

Richie drops into a fairly competent Obi Wan Kenobi. “They travel single file to hide their numbers...”

“Yeah, that makes sense, in a *fucking laundry room*--”

“Well, *somebody* has to save our skins!”

“What, what is that?”

“It's Princess Leia, come on, I thought you were the nerd here.”

“I know whose line it is, I'm just trying to figure out why you sound like you're talking with a mouthful of helium.”

Richie puts a hand on his chest, his voice mock wounded. “It's called an *impression*.”

“Yeah, and not a good one. Now do Yoda.”

Richie spends the dry cycle going through all his impressions for Eddie. The feedback he receives ranges from “mediocre” to “abysmal-”(for Han Solo and one of those teddy bear dudes, respectively), but Eddie never stops laughing.

It's a good sound, one Richie hoards away for himself.



Once they've lugged all the laundry back up to Eddie's hamster cage of a room, Richie goes for his backpack again. He pulls out the bottle of wine from where it's carefully nestled between his sleeping bag and his hoodie, holding it out to Eddie.

“What is that?”

“It’s a host gift. Or something like that. One of those things my mom used to bug me about. Since you’re letting me crash here.”

“Richie, you don’t have to... I don’t really drink anyway.”

“This shit is barely even drinking anyway, it’s basically just a Capri-Sun.”

Eddie looks at him curiously, then unscrews the top. He takes way too long a sip and pulls away with a wrinkled nose. “It is *not*,” he sputters.

“You’re not supposed to chug it, dumbass,” Richie says with a laugh. “Here.” He takes a sip from the bottle himself, then hands it back.

Eddie stares at the bottle for a moment, then takes another, more cautious sip. Then another. And another.

They sit on the floor of the tiny room, only half-watching the grainy picture on the TV as they trade sips from the bottle. Eddie’s posture starts to melt down into the floor, until around midnight, when he ends up with his head resting on Richie’s lap. Without thinking, Richie rests a hand in his hair, a carelessly fond gesture. His heart pounds in his chest, and he tries to will it to stop, to pull his hand away.

“Don’t stop. ‘S nice,” Eddie mumbles.

Richie laughs softly and puts his hand back. Quiet settles over the room, the kind that feels restful instead of failed. His gaze drifts from the TV to the star map over Eddie’s bed. Some of the faded stars are still glowing a faint yellow-green in the dark room. “You had that thing when you were a kid, didn’t you?”

“Long as I can remember. Why?”

“I remember it... a little. You had it on your ceiling. Almost broke your neck trying to get it up there. You couldn’t go stargazing like you wanted because... because...” His voice trails off as he loses the thread of the memory entirely, its edges fading into the rest of the

fog.

"It was raining," Eddie mumbles.

"Yeah?"

"Wasn't safe." Richie waits for more, but he gets nothing in response but a faint snore. He nudges Eddie's shoulder gently. "Hey. You falling asleep on me, Eds?"

Eddie shakes his head, but Richie can already see sleep settling heavily on his slender frame. "C'mon. Let's get up."

"Noooo," Eddie groans, reluctantly lifting his head and revealing the faint imprint of Richie's jeans on his cheek.

"Here, lemme put the sheets on the bed. Sit up," he says, as he helps Eddie, leaning him back against the wall. He helps Eddie into bed, laughing softly as Eddie pulls the blankets over himself.

Richie reaches down impulsively, tousling that dark hair again. There's a sleepy smile on Eddie's face as he settles back, looking up at Richie. He starts to open his mouth, then slowly closes it again.

"What?"

"You tried to kiss me once, didn't you?"

Richie freezes, his hand still in Eddie's hair.

Because he does. He remembers--

being newly thirteen, crammed together in a twin bed that didn't really fit them both anymore, looking up at faintly glowing stars, listening to the rain pouring outside, the curve of Eddie's cheek in the faint light of the streetlight, quickly and clumsily pressing his lips to the patches of light there--

that night. How could he have forgotten?

Who stole it from me?

The thought vanishes before it can fully settle, and he shakes his head, pulling his hand away. “Nah, Eds. That wasn't me. I wouldn't have had the guts.”

Even half-drunk, he's still a great bullshit artist.

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

thanks so much for all your lovely comments. you are all absolute darlings.

suggested listening for this chapter: "warmth" by Bastille.

It isn't a one night thing, but it isn't an every night thing.

By finals week, two or three days will go by before Richie resurfaces at the coffee shop, bouncing off the walls despite the bone deep exhaustion in his eyes. "I found a new job, second shift at the All Niter Diner. It's fuckin' awful, but I'm making money."

Eddie does a bit of math. Day shift at the coffee shop, swing shift at the diner, night shift at the bar Richie won't tell him about, plus the occasional closing shifts at the coffee shop...

"Richie, when do you sleep?"

Richie doesn't say anything, just stares him dead in the face while taking a long sip of coffee. It has the rhythm of a joke, but Eddie can't laugh. There's an awful ache in his chest, one that only gets worse as he catches glimpses of Richie leaning up against the counter when he thinks Eddie isn't looking, his whole body sagging under the weight of days that don't end.

"Richie, you're coming back to mine tonight."

"No, I can't, it's gonna be a busy night, I'm gonna stop in at the bar and see if they need extra help--"

"Richie, you've gotta get some sleep."

"It's fine, Eddie--"

"No, it's not," Eddie says, his voice unexpectedly threatening to crack. "It's not fine, and you're not fine, and I don't care if I have to drag

you back to the dorms myself, you're coming--"

"Jesus, okay, Eds. I'll... I'll come back tonight. If it makes you feel better." Richie even flashes him that familiar crooked grin.

"It will. I promise.

Richie snaps his fingers suddenly, as if he's suddenly remembered something. "Oh, shit! I just remembered-- I found a place to stay. Maybe. It's like, a room over someone's garage, but the guy said he'd give me a break on the rent if I helped him fix the place up. I should be in there by New Year's, if everything goes well."

"That's great! Have you seen it yet?"

"Nah, but he says the last tenant trashed it pretty good, so he's been looking for someone trustworthy. Turns out I'm a great actor!"

"I'd trust you."

"Yeah, well, you didn't see my bedroom in high school. So, you going home for winter break?"

An icy lump settles in Eddie's stomach. He hadn't even thought about that. It's too late to sign up to stay now. And it's only going to get worse if he scrambles for an excuse to stay anyway. "Yeah, I guess."

"Gotta say, I'm a little overwhelmed by the enthusiasm here, Eddie."

"You'd understand if you knew her," he says quietly, going back to his textbook. He has an organic chemistry final the next day. He needs to focus. He doesn't have time to worry about his mother waiting for him in Queens.

He's almost startled by the scrape of chair legs against linoleum when Richie sits down across from him, leaning in. "You okay, Eds?"

"What? No, I'm just... I'm worried about finals, that's all--"

"Look, I don't... remember your mom that much. I mean, I don't remember shit, so that kind of goes without saying, but what I remember..."

Eddie remembers a *brightly printed invitation to "Richard's 8th Birthday," crumpled under her hands, balled up in the trash. "You're not going. That boy's no good."*

"She didn't like you."

"Well, I mean, that's normal, but--"

Another memory-- a gaggle of kids in the back window of his mother's station wagon, getting smaller and smaller as she hurtles toward the hospital.

"She doesn't like any of my friends."

Richie sighs, dragging a hand over his face. "I don't know what I'm trying to say anymore. Just--"

He's cut off from whatever thoughts he's trying to gather by the clatter of the shop's door. "Shit. Hang on," he mumbles, scrambling over to the counter. Once he's back there, that easy smile switches on like a neon sign, and that effortlessly funny patter rolls off his tongue like he's learned it by heart. He jokes about their majors, their roommates, their professors, their favorite bars.

Eddie wonders, not for the first time, if any of Richie's regulars even know his name.

He turns back to his books with a vengeance, trying to bury the roiling mix of frustration and worry in his stomach under *alcohols, ethers, epoxides, and sulfides*. He doesn't start to pack or even look up from his notes until he hears the clatter of Richie trying to clean up as quickly as possible. Then he sighs softly and starts to pack his books up. By the time he's done, Richie is standing at the door, holding a muffin out to him.

"I'm not hungry."

"You've been here a hundred years and you didn't have anything but coffee. See, this has gotta be a two way street, Eds-- if you're gonna get on my case about sleeping, I'm gonna get on you about eating--"

"No, see, skipping a meal or two isn't gonna kill me, but you-- I

legitimately don't know how you're still alive, Richie."

"That makes two of us, pal," Richie says, twirling the keys to the shop on his finger. "You wanna move your ass outta this doorway so we can get the fuck out of here or what?"

"Let's go," Eddie says through a mouthful of muffin.

The walk to the dorm is cold, dark, and gray, a fierce winter wind hounding then all the way to the door of Eddie's dorm. They're almost to the elevator when a voice from the desk calls out to Eddie.

"Mr. Kaspbrak, a word, please?"

Eddie's stomach drops. "Hang on a sec," he whispers to Richie, before walking over. It takes him a second to place the balding middle-aged man in a polo emblazoned with the school's mascot-- the hall director, he remembers vaguely from some long-ago orientation meeting. "Yes, sir?"

"We've taken a number of calls from your mother over this semester inquiring about your welfare. Six this week, actually. Now, privacy rules prevent us from releasing information to anyone, including your mother. This hasn't deterred her. I am strongly encouraging you to call her tonight and give her the correct telephone extension for your dorm."

Fuck. The gamble he'd made in that first letter home hadn't paid off. "Okay. I... I must have messed it up, I'm sorry."

The hall director nods, that coolly polite smile Eddie remembers from the meeting settling into place. "Understandable. You've had a busy first semester."

"Thanks," Eddie says quietly, pulling away to go back to Richie.

"And one more thing, Mr. Kaspbrak."

Eddie looks back over his shoulder.

"Consult your student handbook for our policy on overnight guests, please."

Eddie can't speak. He just nods before practically running towards Richie. The other boy is leaning up against the wall, a gesture that would look cool and relaxed if Eddie didn't know how exhausted he was.

"Having a little chat with Jeeves there, huh? Tell you what, if I knew college came with a real butler, I would have tried harder in high school, maybe even gone to class sometimes-- what's wrong?"

"He's not a butler, he's the hall director," Eddie says absently, frantically hammering the up button until the doors open.

"I know, Eds, it's a joke. What's wrong?" He reaches out, like he's about to touch Eddie, then stops himself, something he's been doing more and more lately.

"My mom's been calling. And... he warned me about having guests. I thought we'd be fine, because you were only staying a couple nights at a time, but I guess they noticed."

Richie's jaw clenches, and he looks away from Eddie, closing his eyes. "Fuck. You're not in trouble, are you?"

"I don't think so, but... I thought you could at least stay through the week, until I have to leave, you need a place to stay--"

"Hey, don't worry about me, I'm an alley cat, okay, I'm tough-- I don't wanna get you fucked over because of me, I'll grab my bag and go."

"Fuck no," Eddie says, the fierceness of it surprising even him. "You're staying tonight, you have to get some sleep, or you'll keel over."

"But--"

The elevator chimes softly, and the doors slide open at Eddie's floor. "No. You're staying tonight. You already got this far."

Richie opens his mouth to argue, then closes his eyes. "Okay. I'll stay. But in the morning, I'm gone. I'm not taking you down with me."

Eddie pushes the door open, rolling his eyes. "They're not gonna send

me to jail or something, you're so dramatic. They'll just write me up, it doesn't even matter, really." He isn't actually sure about that last part, but he's not about to tell Richie that.

Nothing the school can do to him is worse than Richie being out there alone.

Eddie pulls his chemistry notebook out and goes to his desk, flicking on the lamp. He intends to study some more, until he hears the familiar rustle of a nylon sleeping bag. He twists around in his chair and shakes his head. "No, just use my bed, Richie, come on."

"I'm not kicking you out of your bed."

"You're not! I can stay on the other one, when I'm done studying, but you need to sleep in an actual bed. Not this shitty floor."

"Eddie..."

"I'm not even going to go to sleep for a while yet."

Richie just stands there holding his sleeping bag, too tired to talk at all, let alone argue with him, but still trying. Eddie tosses his notebook over to the spare bed and grabs one of his spare blankets out of the dresser, spreading it over the bare mattress. Then he climbs into the bed and leans against the wall, staring resolutely at Richie. "See? It's fine. Now go to sleep," he says, opening up the notebook.

Richie nods slowly and drops the sleeping bag. He goes instead to grab out a pair of sweatpants that have been washed and worn so much they've turned into some kind of grayish non-color. He changes into them and pulls off his t-shirt without a single wiseass remark. If Eddie were in a joking mood, he'd run over and press his hand against Richie's forehead, checking for a fever. But neither of them want that tonight.

Instead, Richie collapses slowly onto the bed, turning onto his side, his back to Eddie. He's tall enough that he has to bend his knees in order to be comfortable. Eddie has the notebook open in his lap, but he doesn't really read his own neat handwriting or the complicated charts he's made much. He keeps stealing glances at Richie across the

room, watching as his breathing enters the slow and steady rhythm of sleep, eyes tracing the wiry muscles along his back. He wishes he could untangle the stories hidden there, all the time wound up between the dream fragments of Derry and now.

Once he's absolutely sure that Richie is asleep, Eddie slips out of bed. He goes to the phone on his desk, carefully and quietly picking it up. He carries it out to the hall, as far as the power cord will allow. He sits down against the wall and just lingers for a moment in the late night quiet of the hallway. Then he takes the phone off the hook and dials his mother's apartment in Queens.

She picks up on the first ring, her voice rattling down the line like a cannonball on the deck of a ship. "Edward Kenneth Kaspbrak. Do you have any idea how worried I've been?"

How could he not? He has spent his whole life calibrated to account for all the dark and whirling worries she carries with her. "Mom, I'm sorry, I was at the library, it's finals week--"

"It's finals week before it occurs to you that your mother might want to talk to you? Or know you're alive?"

His voice stalls in his throat. "Mom, I was busy, I'm sorry--"

"And they wouldn't tell me where you were! I didn't know! I didn't know anything!"

Eddie does what he always does-- he apologizes until he's hoarse, until he's ready to slump over in the hallway. She doesn't even acknowledge most of them, just plowing over them as she lists all his flaws for the record that both of them are keeping: *inconsiderate, ungrateful, reckless, selfish, weak...*

Things were better when I was sick, he thinks, then shakes his head. That's not a fair thought, really. She's trying to hold onto him the only way she knows how.

It's his fault, really, that he doesn't know how to tell her that it's strangling him. He lets his head fall back against the cinder block wall and closes his eyes.

“When are you coming home?”

“My last exam is tomorrow. And I have to be out by noon Saturday.”
Maybe he can buy Richie a few more days in the dorm, somehow.

“I’ll wire you money for a bus ticket in the morning. Call me as soon as you have it. I need to know these things, Eddie. I need to know so that I can take care of you.”

“I know, Mom.”

“Good. I love you.”

“I love you too,” he murmurs. When the line clicks, he slips back into his room and sets the phone back on the desk. For a moment, he just stands there in the dark room, gently massaging his hand. He hadn’t realized how tightly he had been gripping the phone.

In the faint light coming through the window, he can see light reflecting off of Richie’s glasses. He laughs softly and carefully slides them off the other boy’s face and sets them on the desk.

I used to do that a lot, he thinks. He follows that trail back to a memory that comes up a lot lately, clearer than the others. It’s a whole story, not a single disjointed moment.

They’re in his room, listening to the radio at a low volume-- or at least, they were. Now Eddie is the only awake, and he knows those glasses will get ruined if Eddie sleeps in them. He tries to slip them off Richie’s face.

“What’re you doing?”

“You fell asleep with your glasses on. Your dad’s gonna go batshit if they get messed up again.”

Richie smiles softly at him and drapes one arm over Eddie. “You’re always lookin’ out for me, Eds,” he mumbles sleepily.

“If you get grounded, what am I gonna do? Go to Boy Scouts with Stan?”

“Like your mom would ever let you run around in the wilderness.”

"Whatever. Here, lemme..." Eddie trails off, maneuvering under Richie's arm to take the glasses off. Once he has them carefully folded up and placed on his bedside table, he settles back down, scooting a little closer to Richie. It's gotten a lot more crowded in this twin bed since Richie started getting so tall. But neither of them seem to mind.

His eyes are closed, but he is awake when he feels the shy press of Richie's lips against his cheek. He carries that memory with him into sleep, half-terrified it might be a dream.

Richie doesn't remember it. Maybe it was a dream.

It's not the worst dream he's ever had.

He tries to be as quiet as possible when he changes into a t-shirt and shorts. Richie hasn't looked this relaxed in weeks. Eddie doesn't want to ruin that.

He drifts off to sleep, lulled by Richie's gentle snoring.



Richie flails awake at noon, about an hour before Eddie's exam. Eddie is poring over his notes one more time when he hears him scrabbling around for his glasses. "They're on the desk behind you, Sleeping Beauty,"

"Shit. What fuckin' day is it," Richie says, voice still low and hoarse with sleep.

"Thursday."

"Fuck. I feel like I've been asleep for eighty years."

"You could've been. I wouldn't have been surprised. My exam's in an hour."

Richie is stepping into his jeans, an effort that's still clumsy and uncoordinated. "It's your last one, right?"

"Yeah."

“When are you leaving?”

Eddie sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Tonight. My mom sent money, I’m supposed to get on the ten o’clock bus to Pittsburgh, and then from there to New York. Richie, where are you gonna stay tonight?”

Richie waves a hand airily. “Don’t worry about it. I’m calling in some favors. And then, hey, it’s not long til I’ll be in my own place. New Year’s at the latest.”

“Are you sure? I can always change the ticket--”

“Don’t. You’re probably in Dutch with your mom as it is. Hey, on the bright side, I can walk you to the bus stop!”

“What?”

“It’s across the street from the diner, Eddie. Hell, I could probably throw a rock and hit it from the side door, if I really wanted.”

“You can’t throw for shit.”

Richie shrugs his backpack onto his shoulders. “It’s that close. Take it or leave it, Eddie Spaghetti.”

Eddie tilts his head, carefully considering it as he packs his bag. “Yeah. I’d like that, Richie.”

Richie grins at him and opens the door with a bow. “Age before beauty, my friend.”

“Aren’t you a couple months older?”

“Fuck if I know, I barely remember what’s on my fake ID. Come on, Eds, ándale, you’ve got a test to get to!”

They part ways just outside the dorm, Richie giving him a big thumbs up. “You’ve got this. You’re gonna fuck up the curve for everyone.”

Eddie laughs and shakes his head. “I’ll be happy with just passing. See you later, okay?”

Richie flashes him a peace sign before he disappears around the corner. Eddie can faintly hear him whistling and can't help but smile.



The exam leaves Eddie's brain feeling like cottage cheese rolling around in his skull, and he's happy to turn in his Scantron and flee the cavernous lecture hall. Packing his suitcase is easy enough- he hasn't had to worry about laundry since Richie showed him how to cheat the machines, and he doesn't have to bring any textbooks back for this break.

Once he's packed his suitcase, he fidgets impatiently, waiting until it's time to walk to the bus stop.

The bars ringing campus are lively tonight, enjoying their last boom of business for the semester, and Eddie hums along to the music, dragging his roller suitcase along behind him.

He'll miss this place, he realizes as he crosses the street in a throng of happy, chattering drunks. It doesn't feel half as lonely as home ever did.

Could you really call it home if it felt like that?

"Hey, Eddie Spaghetti!"

Eddie turns and sees Richie waving from the side door of a shiny stainless steel diner, like something out of an old movie. He jumps down from the little step and runs towards Eddie, smiling. He doesn't have a coat on, just a black t-shirt, jeans, and an apron, but the cold doesn't seem to affect him. He's got his hands shoved in his pockets as he slows down to match Eddie's pace. "Toldja it was close."

"Yeah. Aren't you working?"

"Everybody else in that fuckin' place takes smoke breaks. Far as they're concerned, this is mine. What time is it?"

Eddie checks his watch. "Shit, it's almost ten."

“Don't sweat it, Eddie. Buses aren't ever on time, I'm pretty sure that's in the Constitution.”

Eddie laughs, but that little knot of nervousness in his stomach doesn't go away. Probably because it has nothing to do with the bus.

The bus stop is a little bench outside a gas station, totally abandoned at this time of night. Richie starts clearing the dusting of snow off the bench-- making a place for him to sit, Eddie realizes. He can feel the blush creeping up his neck and into his cheeks.

“Jesus, Richie, aren't you cold?”

The other boy scoffs, brushing some snow off on his jeans. “After being in that kitchen all night? This feels amazing. Breathing in some nice refreshing car exhaust instead of bacon grease is the best thing for me.”

“If you say so.” Eddie settles down on the park bench, then fumbles in his coat, pulling out a notecard he'd recycled from his history class. “Hey, uh... this is my address, in Queens. If you wanna write me. I mean, I figured you'd be busy with moving and work and all but it you want too...”

Richie looks down at the card for a moment, then looks down at Eddie, smiling as he tucks the notecard into the pocket of his jeans. “Yeah. I'll write you. I'm not much of a writer, but I'll try.”

The bus rumbles up to the stop, and Eddie jumps to his feet. He grabs around for his suitcase, until he sees that Richie has rolled it forward for him. “Jesus, what do you have in this thing, rocks?”

“Just a couple books, in case I get bored.”

“What a fuckin' nerd,” Richie says, nothing but warmth in his voice. Eddie is about to reach out and take the suitcase when he pulls Richie into a long hug instead, tucking his head under the taller boy's chin. He closes his eyes and breathes in deep, smelling burnt coffee, cooking smoke, and something else faintly woodsy and aromatic that he can't define. Richie holds him tighter, and for just a moment, Eddie can feel him resting his head against his.

“See ya, Richie.”

“See ya, Eds. Don't talk to any weirdos on the bus, okay?”

“You're the only weirdo I need in my life, Richie.”

With that, Eddie slowly pulls away and drags his suitcase on the bus. He barely manages to wrestle it into one of the compartments over his seat, then drops into it as the bus starts to pull away. Richie is still standing there, so he waves.

He laughs as Richie waves back, then starts to chase the bus, pulling ridiculous faces to make Eddie laugh. Richie follows them all the way back to the diner, when he has to turn back. Eddie turns in his seat to watch as Richie and the rest of the town vanish into the dark winter night.

He falls asleep smiling.

Notes for the Chapter:

i once worked a three job schedule very much like the one described for Richie. much like Richie, i also do not know how i'm alive. 0/10, would not recommend.

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

suggested listening for this chapter: "the silence" by Bastille and "can't fight this feeling" by REO Speedwagon. honestly, you could spin a wheel of Bastille songs and it would work as suggested listening for these chapters eventually.

Richie keeps that little index card tucked in his wallet, folded neatly in the slot behind his fake ID. In the minutes he has between shifts, he unfolds it carefully and looks at the address written carefully in Eddie's tiny, neat handwriting, in the space between World War I battles and dates.

8750 Griffin Ct

Apt 9A

Flushing, NY

In the lower right corner, there's a little doodle of a house with an open door and a puff of smoke coming from the chimney, a tree with a tire swing beside it. It feels like a dream, or a wish, and seeing it nestled among all these facts and figures like a dandelion pushing up through the sidewalk makes an impossible rush of fondness bloom in Richie's chest.

He finally gets into the garage apartment two days before Christmas. It's small, and it still smells faintly musty, and there's plywood over one of the only windows, but it's his.

He sets the little portable FM radio up on the kitchen and cranks the volume up as high as it'll go and spends his first full day off in months cleaning the place until it shines, or at least looks less like a crime scene in waiting.

In the late afternoon, he's only made his way through the kitchen, and he urgently needs to resupply. He runs down the stairs, winds his

way through the stacks of junk in the old man's garage, and heads off to the corner store, whistling to himself.

He's waiting in line with an armload of cleaning supplies when he notices the spinning rack of postcards. They're all boring as shit, and some have them might have been sitting there since the Eisenhower administration.

He spins the rack around, trying to act like he's just browsing and not deeply considering which of these interchangeable cityscapes to send to Eddie. Somehow, the little square on the back of these things intimidates him less than a full sheet of notebook paper.

But he still wants it to be just right, if not perfect.

He finally picks one of the ones off the bottom rack: a yellow tinted photo of some suspension bridge over the muddy river, a red banner declaring it "The Key to the Sea!" It's ugly and it doesn't make sense. It's perfect.



When the apartment is as clean as it's going to get, Richie sprawls across the bare wooden floor, smiling contentedly at the ceiling. The radio is playing a song that sounds faintly familiar-- *bring me a higher love/what's that higher love I keep thinking of*-- and he closes his eyes.

it's too hot to even breathe, let alone move, but both of them are outside, Eddie drifting in the playground swing, dragging one foot through the dust and singing the only two lines of the song he knows over and over, and Richie doesn't know what he's waiting for but he's listening to those same two lines hanging off key in the summer heat like the best music he's ever heard...

Richie opens his eyes and fumbles for one of the paper sacks he brought back from the corner store. He pulls out the postcard and a cheap black pen. Without thinking too much about it, he starts to sketch a crude lizard monster, some kind of roaring Godzilla knockoff, rising out of the river behind the bridge, claws outstretched for the city. Then he adds a couple dive-bombing planes for good

measure, and a couple panicked stick figures fleeing the scene.

By the time Richie adds a capsized boat and a mysterious monster tentacle in the foreground, he figures it's probably past time to stop fucking around and actually write the note.

Eddie,

not much going on here, as you can see. just another Tuesday! hope NYC is treating you okay,

Richie

ps: got the place, so you can quit worrying about me.

He drops it in the mail on his way to work the next day, and he thinks about it the whole rest of the day.



Eddie's reply arrives a couple of days before New Year's, and Richie's stupid, treacherous heart threatens to hurl itself out of his throat and onto the slurry of ice and snow on the pavement when he sees that little rectangle tucked into the mailbox.

He won't let himself look at it until he's back inside his apartment, settled at his wobbly kitchen table. The postcard is of the Statue of Liberty as seen from... some boat out on the harbor, Richie guesses. She's haloed by a series of scribbles, swirls, and dots that are meant to be fireworks, he realizes after a moment. He smiles and turns the postcard over. All the stress of the day split between the coffee shop and the diner melts away.

Richie,

It's okay. Mom is Mom, but I keep making up errands out of the house. She doesn't have to know I'm just looking for postcards, right?

My condolences on the Godzilla attack,

Eddie

PS: I tried to do some artwork, but it turns out I can't draw.

This time, Richie picks a postcard of a cornfield that could be anywhere between here and Nebraska, sketching a UFO beaming up a cow and its hapless farmer.

Eddie Spaghetti,

jeez, you don't have to go out looking for them, I'm just grabbing mine off the rack at the corner store. they have anything you want, as long as it's ugly.

Richie Tozier, Esquire

p.s: Godzilla is from Tokyo. we got hit by Toddzilla, his asshole cousin out of Indianapolis. common mistake!

p.s. 2: remind me when you get back to tell you about the guy who threw a piece of toast at me.

He takes Eddie's postcard and carefully tacks it to the wall over his bed. Those goofy little fireworks make him smile every time he looks at them.

His apartment is starting to look like a real person lives there. He's had to cash in most of the favors people owe him to do it, but hey, he has a couch now. Even a big rug to cover the discolored floorboards in the middle of the room, like some kind of millionaire. And it's clean enough that Eddie wouldn't hate being here (he hopes).

Eddie's next reply comes on the back of a garish neon panorama of Times Square. "Jesus, Eds," Richie says, shaking his head and laughing to himself.

Richie,

I don't know, they've got ugly here in New York too. And I get to run around all week like a tourist. My mom's convinced I'm going to get hit by a bus or something, but so far I'm surviving.

Eddie (no spaghetti)

PS: I'm coming back late next Sunday. Probably 11 or later?

PPS: It's actually "P.P.S.", for "post-postscript."

PPPS: Toast???

Richie adds a horde of shambling zombies to the old scene of a city park and sends it to Eddie.

Eddie Rigatoni-- better?

I bet you have a fanny pack and everything. you used to carry about six of them when we were kids. remember?

Pretty sure you're smart enough to out maneuver a bus.

Richie T. Tozier III

p.s: I think I have to work then, but I'll be at the coffee shop Monday night, if you're not busy. can show you Chez Richie after?

p.s. 2: that's dumb as hell, I'm not gonna do it.

p.s. 3: least it wasn't one of the muffins. I'd be dead or in a coma if one of them hit me.



There isn't time to get another postcard, and Richie definitely doesn't spend the next couple of days moping about it. Definitely doesn't keep pulling Eddie's two postcards off the wall and reading them over and over, just to hear his voice in his head. Definitely doesn't imagine other letters he might have written.

Did I always feel like this about him?

He's been remembering more and more, filling out the map of who he used to be, who he could be. And Eddie is the thread that he keeps following when the shadows start to resolve themselves into shapes that creep into his nightmares.

He remembers enough to make them into real stories now.

It's just that none of them are the stories he wants to tell about himself.



They're walking their bikes home in the fading sunlight because Eddie was too tired to ride, sand and dirt from the quarry still sticking to his skin. There are two other kids with them-- one tall like Richie, with sharp features and curly brown hair, watching the world with a quiet intensity, the other short, with sandy hair and a pleasant round face, brow furrowed in intense thought as he trails a bit behind them.

There was so much quiet that summer, he remembers now. What were they carrying in that silence?

Ben's voice shatters it like a brick through a window.

"Bev's pretty, right?"

Richie turns to face him, baffled, as if Ben has just asked him whether he thinks Mars has nice weather. This isn't something they talk about. They talk about movies and music and whether or not you really could jump the Kenduskeag on a bike (Eddie: "no way;" Ben: "maybe on a motorcycle;" Stan: "no, and please don't try it, Richie"). They don't talk about girls.

"I don't know, it's Bev," he scoffs. "She's just Bev." He expects a chorus of agreement.

"Yeah, Bev's pretty."

"And she's really cool too," Eddie adds. "Like, when she jumped into the quarry before any of us? That was cool."

The admiration in Eddie's voice sets off something white hot and ugly in Richie's gut. He can feel his lip start to curl up in a sneer before he can stop himself. Ben must see it too, and his face flushes bright red. He lowers his head and gets back on his bike. "I... I gotta go. My mom's waiting for me. See you guys later," he mumbles, before taking off at top speed down the road, kicking up dust behind him.

Richie smirks and lets out a low, impressed whistle. He can feel the sharpness of his words before they even leave his mouth, and no amount of laughter in the world can hide the deep running spring of meanness they bubbled out of. "That kid can really motor when he wants to, huh?"

Stan is looking at him with his head slightly tilted in that mixture of disappointment and irritation, the one that makes Richie feel about three feet tall. "What? I'm just saying--"

"Why are you being such a jerk about Bev?"

"Yeah, Richie, what the hell?"

"I don't know, what's up with the fuckin' love fest? A girl starts hanging out with us so now we gotta moon about her? The same girl, by the way, that everyone in town talks about?"

Eddie frowns. "People talk about Bev?"

"Yeah, people talk about Bev, you checked out a bathroom wall lately?"

Stan shakes his head. He won't even look at Richie, but the icy disappointment radiates off him in waves. "Grow up, Richie." With that, he climbs into his own bike and rides away. Richie wants to apologize, to run after him, but he doesn't. He looks down at the ground instead, watching the cracks on the sidewalk as he walks his bike.

He expects to hear Eddie push ahead and leave, like the others. There's a small, bitter part of him that thinks he deserves it.

But Eddie keeps walking in step with him, until they get to his house. He lets out a sigh of relief when he sees that his mother's car is gone. "She's still at book club, that means I can wash up before she freaks out. You wanna come in?"

And Richie would like nothing more than to come up to Eddie's room and hang out in his room, messing with his action figures and watching the stars on his ceiling glow as it gets dark outside.

But he shakes his head. "No, I gotta get home. It'll be dark soon, my mom'll kill me."

“Okay. See you tomorrow?”

“Yeah.”

Richie pedals home so hard and fast that he can't breathe. He wishes that he could explain, that he could put into words what he thinks is pretty, that he could tell anyone anything at all without wrapping it in a joke.

His whole life, he thought jealousy was supposed to be green. But for him, it will always be a dull and choking gray-brown, like the dust under his wheels.



“Hello? Earth to Richie?”

Richie shakes his head, walking back to the bar with two cases of beer in hand. “Sorry, what's up, Donna? Couldn't hear you over the music,” he says with a shrug as he heaves them onto the bar counter.

“We don't turn on the music for another hour, ace.”

“... Shit. That usually works.”

His manager doesn't look up from the glasses she's polishing. “So it's safe to assume you didn't hear a damn word of what I asked you.”

“Pretty safe, yeah.”

“The guy Will booked isn't gonna show.”

Richie lets out a gasp of mock surprise, clutching his chest. “You mean that guy Will knows from the casino isn't a pro?”

“You wanna be the funny guy tonight or not, Rich?”

“What?”

“I need some kind of act for tonight. I'm not letting Will get his band back together, I'll wanna burn this whole place down before they finish their first song.”

Richie does an exaggerated bow. “Madame, it would give me no greater pleasure than to headline for the Ugly Mug on this Thursday evening.”

“Control your mouth til ten and you're golden. In the meantime, go scrub out the men's room. Last night's closers apparently can't read a fucking checklist.”

“I was made for the glamour of show business,” Richie says in a dreamy sigh, dragging the mop and bucket behind him.



Nerves are for normal people, and Richie's never qualified for that title. When he's performing, he's as close as he'll ever get to being what other people want from him. It's easier than breathing most of the time.

The Ugly Mug has never been an easy crowd. Normally, when he's up there filling time, it's all he can do to get a couple of audible chuckles. But tonight, they're putty in his hands. He even catches Donna laughing, and he didn't think she was physiologically capable of it.

It's been a good night.

He finishes his set and goes back to the dishes, but Donna shoos him out, shoving a glass of water in his hand. “No, take a break.”

“What, was it that bad?”

“You did great, ace.. I want you to do it again for the midnight crowd. They'll love you.”

“Maybe it's just the Long Islands, I mean, that's some pretty wicked stuff you're serving--”

“Go take a break,” she says, in a tone that brooks no argument.

Richie takes his glass of water and goes to sit out in the alley for a while. He takes a deep breath of the cold night air and wonders if

maybe he should take up smoking. Then he'd have something to do other than stare at the dumpster and watch the racoons.

He wishes he could tell Eddie about tonight. About how he got a whole room of strangers laughing like they were all friends.

He runs a hand back through his shaggy hair. It's starting to curl a little bit now. He likes the way it looks, but... he should cut it. Make it easier to hide.

There was always a part of Richie that thought if he just put enough miles between him and wherever home used to be, he wouldn't have to hide anymore.

But only dumbasses believe in geographic cures.



“Eddie Rigatoni is way worse.”

Richie can't help the smile that breaks across his face when he hears Eddie's familiar voice. “Hey, man, Eddie Spaghetti rhymes. You can't get a better name than that. Here, catch,” he says, tossing a misshapen muffin at the other boy. He barely manages to catch it, in a truly stunning display of non-athleticism. “Nice job, Eds. You headed for Olympic trials next?”

“Oh, fuck off, Richie,” Eddie says. But Richie can hear the smile in his voice as he unpacks his books at his usual table. “You look better.”

“Yeah? Thanks, I started trying this new thing where I... what do you call it... take a fucking shower and sleep sometimes?”

“Groundbreaking.”

“Yeah, it's gonna be huge when people catch onto this. Plus, I know where I'm gonna sleep at night, it's a huge help.”

He expects a laugh, but Eddie just looks at him like he's just seen the saddest part of a Lifetime movie. “Oh, come on, I'm kidding. Besides, that's over now.”

“Things can still matter even when they're over.”

Richie wrinkles his nose. “Gross. So what's your class schedule like this time around? Are you still gonna be scheduling your day minute by minute?”

“I only have to take one gen ed this semester-- theater history 1600 to present, I had that today. It's okay. Kind of boring, but okay. Everything else is science and math, stuff I'll actually need.”

“When do they start teaching you actual doctor stuff?”

“Med school, I guess,” Eddie says with a laugh. “But I gotta get there first.”

“Well, hurry up,” Richie retorts. He brings a coffee over-- two sugars and a truly disgusting and probably illegal amount of creamer, just the way Eddie likes it. “How's your mom?”

Eddie sighs and takes a long sip of his coffee. “She wasn't happy with me. I gotta call her more. She was about ready to make me go to school back there, but I talked her down.”

Richie's stomach drops. “She wouldn't really make you go back, would she?”

“I think she'd do a lot of things if she thought it would make me safe.” Eddie looks away for a moment, out the shop window, and Richie wonders if Eddie knows he can just run away, leave all this shit behind him. Or maybe he knows he can't, really. That'd make him smarter than Richie, anyway.

“Probably wouldn't help much if you told her your old pal Richie T's got your back, huh?”

Eddie laughs again, shaking his head. “Not even a little. But... thanks.”

“I aim to please,” Richie says, walking back to the counter to clean it or invent some other busywork to do. The beginning of the winter is shaping up to be a dead time here. He's grateful to have Eddie back to hang out in the shop.

“So when am I gonna see this legendary apartment?”

“Uh... after close? If you're not busy.”

“It's the first week. It's not allowed to get busy for at least another week or two.”

“So it's a date,” Richie says, before he can stop himself. He turns away and chews the inside of his mouth. *Don't make this weird, don't ruin this...*

He ducks into the back and shuffles things around in the freezer until he remembers how to act like a person. When he walks out again, there's still no one in the shop but Eddie, with an hour and a half until closing. He promptly goes to the counter and hoists himself onto it, nodding along with the song on the radio.

“How does this place even stay open?”

“Because I am a bottomless well of charisma,” Richie says, before getting so into his drum solo that he almost falls off the counter.

“Seriously, I'm like, the only person who's ever in here.”

“I think it's a mob front.”

“Wouldn't there be at least be mobsters in here, then?”

“For this coffee? Not a fuckin' chance, Eds.”

The shop goes quiet again for a moment, and before he can stop himself, Richie asks a question of his own. “Hey, do you remember any of the kids we used to hang out with?”

Eddie's brow furrows as he looks up from his paperback book. “No... I thought it was just us. Wasn't it?”

“See, I remember a couple other kids. Ben and Stan-- you remember Stan? Curly hair, about my height, smart as shit but thought every plant was poison ivy?”

Eddie is about to shake his head, and then recognition slowly flickers

in his dark brown eyes. "He was taller than you, wasn't he?"

Richie scoffs. "What? No, absolutely fuckin' not--"

Eddie laughs, nodding his head and pointing at him. "Yes, he was! He shot up like half a foot over winter break in 7th grade and you were furious--"

"I think you must be confusing me with someone else--"

"No, no, it was definitely you! The first day back, Stan came back and put his elbow on your shoulder and you threw a fit. You got a detention for trying to stand on your chair, just so you could be taller."

Richie winces. "Was I really that much of a shithead?" he asks, as if he doesn't already know the answer.

"Sometimes, yeah." Eddie shakes his head slowly, as if that'll dislodge some more memories. "That's weird. I hadn't thought about them in years, until you said it. I didn't even remember them. Do you remember Bill?"

"You mean Ben? The big kid?"

"No, I mean... Bill. He was sitting alone. They used to call him some fucked up name, something shitty--"

"Stuttering Bill," Richie says quietly. The memory is redeveloping now, details flooding in like a Polaroid--

The air in the middle school cafeteria is warm and cloying, thick with children kept inside despite the early spring sunshine. The rain has finally stopped, but it's still not safe to be outside.

The tables are all crowded, and Richie has already mentally resigned himself to eating against the far back wall with his tray awkwardly balanced on his knees. There's one free space, but like fuck is he sitting there.

Bill Denborough is sitting alone at a table by the window, a full ten foot radius of space around, as if death might be catching. Everyone looks past

him, as though they would prefer that his grief be invisible. His tray is untouched, and his eyes are raw and red from crying as he watches out the window.

Richie is fully prepared to walk on past, to contribute to Derry's unofficial grief quarantine. But Stan stops. "He shouldn't be alone right now."

"Stan, come on, we don't even know him."

"Yeah, what if he just wants to be left alone," Eddie says, trying to keep his voice down.

"Did you want to be left alone when your dad died, Eddie?"

Eddie's mouth opens and closes again. "No," he says quietly. "You're right." Then the both of them turn to Richie, staring at him.

Richie scrabbles around his mind, frantically looking for an out. He comes up with nothing. "Fine. But you guys better do the fucking talking, because I'm never gonna say the right thing."

They sit down with their trays at the table, and Bill doesn't acknowledge them at first. Just keeps staring out the window, like he's waiting for something. Someone.

"Sorry about your brother," Stan says softly.

Bill seems to almost come awake, and he blinks quickly, as if he's just registered their arrival. "I-i-it's okay. Juh-juh-juh-Georgie will come back. I'll find him."

"Shit, you're right. Stuttering Bill. Stan basically made us adopt him, right?"

"Because he was alone."

"Yeah. He never wanted anyone to feel alone."

Richie sighs, shaking his head. "Freaky, for a middle school kid to be that nice. An old fuckin' soul."

"Yeah," Eddie says, a sad smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“Wonder what they're up to now.”

“Fuck if I know. Sitting around wondering who the fuck Richie and Eddie are?”

“Maybe.”

“I'm gonna go take out the garbage. Anybody comes in, tell em to wait or fuck off.”

“Okay, Richie.”

“You're a gem, Eds.”

Richie heads out to the dumpster, a trash bag slung over his shoulder like some half-assed junkyard Santa Claus. “Wouldn't be a half-bad band name,” he says to himself before hurling the bag into the dumpster, reveling in the resounding crash.

There's another crash, echoing back through time, from that other place. He remembers *throwing rock after rock at the last panes of glass left in the old Ironworks, trying desperately to break one and make a sound that echoes the inside of his head, Stan's voice from behind him, asking “Why do you always have to wreck everything?”*

Stan was the first person I ever told the truth to.

He crams a lid on that thought as fast as he can, shoving that to the back of the doomsday closet in his brain, with the rest of the things he refuses to think about.

He runs back into the shop, calling out to Eddie, “Hey, Eds, how's this for a band name: Junkyard Santa Claus.”

“That's fucking terrible,” Eddie says, without looking up from his book.

“Just Junkyard Santa?”

“Even worse. Why, you thinking about starting a band?”

“Nope, I can't do any of that musical shit. Just like to have stuff like

that in my back pocket. What's the chances somebody wanders in during the last hour, you think?"

"Better than the chances of pigs flying, but not by much. Why?"

"Let's get the fuck outta here."

Eddie looks up from his book with one of those bright smiles that threatens to melt all of Richie's armor. "After you, Richie," he says, pulling on his coat and winding that goofy green scarf around his neck.

Richie locks the shop up behind him and leads the way. His apartment is just a couple blocks from the coffee shop, but it's a decent trek from campus. He'll probably need to walk Eddie back.

Or maybe he'll stay.

"So... don't expect to be impressed, okay?" Richie says, trying not to betray the nervousness in his tone. "I don't have a ton of stuff, and I don't really know what I'm doing? But it's mine, so..."

"It's okay, Richie, seriously."

They wind their way through the landlord's piles of mysterious junk to the narrow staircase, and Richie unlocks the door. It's one big room, with Richie's bed in one corner, a wobbly table in the corner with the kitchenette, and a couch in the other.

"This is nice, Richie!"

"You don't have to say that--"

"I know, but I'm gonna do it anyway." Eddie takes his coat off and hangs it by the doorway, then steps out of his shoes. By the time Richie has turned on his little radio, Eddie is sitting on the hideous yellow couch. Richie swallows hard and goes to sit beside him, trying to leave room between them.

Eddie scoots in closer. "It's cold up here." Not a justification, a mere statement of fact.

"Oh, yeah, my kitchen window is broken. Landlord says he'll fix it when the weather's better, but right now, it's a piece of plywood."

"Doesn't it make more sense to fix it now?"

"Hey, don't ask me to try and understand landlord logic while I still have enough of a soul not to do that. Hang on a sec," Richie says, pulling one of the blankets off his bed. He tosses it to Eddie, then sits back down once the other boy has wrapped himself in it thoroughly. "You look like a microwave burrito."

"Fuck off, Richie, I'm cold."

"No, it's... it's cute." Eddie just rolls his eyes. "You sitting down or what?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I am," Richie says, sitting down on the couch beside Eddie. The other boy responds by resting his head on Richie's shoulder.

"I like this song."

"REO Speedwagon? Really, Eds?"

"You used to like it too!"

"Bullshit I did."

"You did! You had this whole thing, you'd sing it into your mom's hairbrush and get down on one knee and sing--"

"Nope, wasn't me."

Eddie fights his way partially out of the blankets and holds an imaginary mic, tossing his hair over one eye as he sings along, "*And even as I wander, I'm keeping you in sight... you're a candle in the window on a cold dark winter's night...* you really don't remember, Richie?" he says, grinning hopefully up at him.

A part of Richie would give anything to say yes, *I remember that, I remember doing all kinds of goofy bullshit to try and get you to see how I felt.* But that would be another lie. And he doesn't think he can

handle another one of those. “Nah, sorry, Eds. Never been a fan.”

Eddie hums thoughtfully to himself, pulling the blankets around himself again. Richie shifts around on the couch, trying to find a comfortable position. He doesn't have a ton of options. That's what he tells himself as he ends up resting his head on Eddie's lap.

“Hey Richie?”

“Yeah, Eds?”

“Do you think normal people forget as much as we did?”

“I'm not a good person to ask, Eddie.”

“Why not?”

“Because my shit's been scrambled,” he says, gesturing to his head with one hand.

“I mean, mine too, Richie--”

“I sincerely fucking hope not, Eddie.”

“What do you mean?”

Richie's jaw clenches, and he tries to shove the secret back, before it falls out and changes the person Eddie sees in him. Before he sees somebody the world broke.

But he's not sure he can carry that part of him alone anymore.

“They played smear the queer a little different out at my high school. They called it a game, but it wasn't. Not really. You didn't get to decide whether or not you wanted to be it. If they saw you, that was it, and it wouldn't end. I stayed under the radar until senior year. Week before Christmas, they threw me down a flight of stairs. Broke my jaw and cracked my head open like a fuckin' egg.”

“Jesus, Richie...”

Richie takes hold of one of Eddie's hands and guides it into his hair,

to the long, ugly scars hidden there. He expects him to flinch away, but he doesn't. "I spent for-fucking-ever in the hospital with my jaw wired shut, with a bunch of doctors trying to figure out how fucked my brain was. So I don't... I don't really know what I remembered before that. I don't know."

"I'm so sorry, Richie."

"It's not your fault," he mumbles. Eddie's hands keep stroking through his hair, and it's-- it's weird, it's really fucking weird, to feel comforted with someone this close to his scars. To feel comforted at all. "Once I got discharged, my dad wanted me to go back. To get my diploma. I told him fuck no. He told me I could go back or get the fuck out. I got the fuck out."

"What happened? To the guys who did it?"

Richie's jaw clenches again. "Don't know. Last I heard, they were just a bunch of fuckin' kids." He doesn't think he could stop the bitterness in his voice even if he tried. He closes his eyes and breathes in as deep as he can, trying to clamp down the angry tears that threaten to slip out.

"Here, Richie, lemme up for a sec," Eddie murmurs. Richie just nods and sits up, staring resolutely at the ugly fucking rug in the middle of his floor as Eddie shifts around. It takes a second for him to recognize what Eddie's trying to do when the other boy guides him to lay down with his back against his chest, resting his forehead at the back of Richie's neck.

"You're okay, Richie. You're okay."

In that moment, he can almost believe it.

Notes for the Chapter:

our sweet boy Stan has arrived. other members of the Losers Club will probably make more appearances in the flashbacks, but Stan's going to play probably the most pivotal role?

although who knows, because i started this fic all

"i'm just gonna focus on Richie and Eddie," and then as it turns out they don't come separately, in my head.

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

suggested listening: "little of your love" by HAIM.

Eddie wakes up to the smells and sounds of cooking. He checks his watch-- 9:30. Still an hour and a half until he has to get to class. He's doing pretty well, all things considered.

And Richie must be doing all right, if he's up making breakfast. Eddie hopes so, at least.

He stretches, trying to undo all the knots and snarls in his body from a night spent on the couch. Richie looks over his shoulder at him from the stove, shooting him a little half smile before turning back. "Morning, sunshine."

"You didn't have to do that, Richie."

"Yeah, well, I was up anyway. You can have anything you want, as long as it's an egg."

Eddie smiles and stifles a yawn behind his hand. "Whatever you wanna make. You sleep okay?"

There's something a little too cheerful about Richie's tone when he answers, like a brittle layer of paint over something dark, already chipping away. "Yep, I slept fine."

"Richie--"

"Look, I'm... I'm sorry."

Eddie's brow furrows, and he stares at Richie's back, baffled. "About what?"

He watches as Richie's shoulders slump, his free hand coming up to grab at the spot where his shoulder meets his neck. "For throwing all that heavy bullshit on you."

Eddie pauses, all the words he wants to say colliding in his head. He wishes he could talk to Stan. Stan would know the right thing to say. "It's okay, Richie."

It's not enough. It could never be enough. But it's what he has.

Richie turns back to him with two mismatched plates of scrambled eggs, setting one in front of Eddie. He takes a bite and shrugs. "They're not my best, but they're edible."

"Are you kidding? These are great, Richie, I didn't know you could cook."

One of Richie's eyebrows arches up, and there's an amused smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. "What do you think I do at the diner, Eds? And I've been feeding myself since I was in high school. I had to figure this shit out eventually."

Eddie's face flushes a bright, embarrassed red. "I know. I just... you always talk shit about the food at the coffee shop, and you make most of that---"

"I said I can cook, not bake. Two totally different operations. And most of the shit there is pre-packaged, all I do is stick it in the oven. Those muffins come in fucking tubs."

"Really?"

"Yep. It's nasty."

"And you let me eat them?"

"You lived."

"Yeah, but still..."

"Guess I must not like you that much," Richie says, before stuffing a piece of toast in his mouth. Eddie can't think of anything else to say, so he sticks his tongue out at Richie before he goes back to eating.

"You have classes today, right?"

"Every day. They run pretty late tonight, I won't be done until 8. Why?"

"Just wondering," Richie says with a shrug as he gets up and starts doing the dishes. Eddie follows him with his own plate, protesting. "Wait, let me help."

"Nah, I've got this, Eddie."

"You went to all that trouble, I could at least--"

Richie takes Eddie's plate with one hand and sets it in the sink. He takes hold of Eddie's hand with the other, running his fingertips absently along the sides of his hand. There are calluses there, Eddie is almost startled to find, and he wonders for a moment if all of Richie is this kind of armor from the world's wounding edges.

Then the other boy seems to catch himself and pull away. "You've done enough, Eds. Seriously. Get to class, okay?"

"Are you gonna be at the shop later?"

"Nah, it's a late one tonight-- I'll be at the diner and then the bar. Tomorrow, though."

Eddie smiles as he gathers his coat and then his backpack. "Sounds good." He pulls his backpack on just as Richie is setting the last plate on the counter to dry. That's when he goes in for an awkward hug, wrapping one of his arms around Richie's waist. He realizes that this might have been a mistake when soapy water slops all over both of them.

He has just a moment to look up at Richie standing there in a black t-shirt soaked with water and suds before he decides to book it down the stairs.

"Aw, what the fuck, Eds?"

"Sorry, gotta go," he calls up the stairs, barely stifling a laugh. He's halfway down the block when he hears the sound of Richie's only functional window creaking open. "Hey, asshole! You forgot your stupid scarf!"

Eddie laughs again. "I'm late! You hang onto it for me, okay?" He gives Richie an exaggerated thumbs up, only to be rewarded with a middle finger.

Eddie grins and keeps walking back to campus. It's a long walk, and maybe he gets lost once, but no one else needs to know about that.

Besides, it gives him time to think.

He's always been able to see the pretty in most people, the part of them that someone else would dream about. He thought everyone else saw the world like that. It's just a part of him, one it hadn't occurred to him to question for ages.

Someone in his would-be girlfriend's drama club mentioned offhand that there was a word for that, and he went and snuck off to the nearest copy of Merriam-Webster to confirm, like any self-respecting nerd. Definition b, at least, seemed applicable.

But that was all theory. Mostly, he assumed he'd always be sick, always be home. And by the time he couldn't be sick enough for his mother, he had seen the other roadblocks go up. He's kissed one girl, Jeanette, a beautiful girl with curly dark and a laugh that could rattle windows. She's the girl he would have taken to junior prom, if Sonia Kaspbrak hadn't melted down an hour before he was supposed to pick her up.

He spent that prom night sitting beside his mother in the ER, reciting her medical history and medications in a kind of numb calm.

They walked out close to midnight without an answer on the doctor's end. But deep down, Eddie has always known the answer: one of them has to be sick for this to work.

Jeanette never talked to him again, and he couldn't really blame her. It isn't like he could promise her it won't happen again.

So he didn't try again. He spent his senior prom and every graduation party with his mother, watching cable TV until she fell asleep, and he resigned any other idea about romance and its ephemera to some far off future.

It's like he told Richie-- he doesn't have that kind of time.

This is a secret he keeps more out of habit than fear. No one's used this to hurt him. Not the way they did with Richie (but then again, they can't use what they don't know, right?)

His hands ball into fists in the pockets of his jacket as he remembers the scars along Richie's head. *Fuck the people who hurt him like that. And fuck the people who turned away while it happened. Did we ever really get out of Derry, if this is the rest of the world?*

He falters for a moment, trying to trace the origin of that thought. There isn't that much wrong with Derry, in the parts he remembers. It was just another small town out of thousands.

Wasn't it?



He's sitting between Bev and Ben in some little clubhouse in the woods, a heavy book open in his lap. Different horrors unspool across every page, in woodcuts and engravings and black and white photographs. He hasn't heard any of these stories, not until Ben told them in a halting, uncertain voice.

"This is some pretty sick stuff, new kid," Bev murmurs. She starts to lean her head against Eddie's shoulder, then stops herself. He glances over at her, wondering in one of those almost overwhelming moments of clarity why she doesn't sit next to Ben if that's what she really wants to do.

"Yeah. And no one talks about any of it. That's the really messed up part," Ben says. "Like, if one of these happened in one of the towns I used to live in, they'd talk about it forever. But in Derry people just..."

"Forget," Bev says, pulling out a cigarette. Her eyes are far away, somewhere none of them quite know how to follow. She pulls away from the two of them and goes to climb the ladder out of there. Ben watches her go, and the longing hangs heavy on the air, so thick that anyone could see it. Hell, even Richie could, maybe even without his glasses.

Eddie laughs at the thought. Ben turns back to him, closing. "I found a

hammock. In my mom's garage. I thought I could hang it in the corner, back there?" he says, pointing.

"Yeah! That's a great idea!"

"Wanna help me put it up?"

"Sure!"

They work in silence for a few moments, until Eddie asks a question. "Do you really think everyone else forgets? Like, our parents, our teachers, everyone?"

Ben is quiet for a long time, so long that Eddie wasn't sure he heard him. "I think they forget. If they even see it at all."

"What?"

"That day, when Henry Bowers got me. He had his knife out on the Kissing Bridge, and a car came by. A guy and his wife were in it, and I thought it'd be okay. That they would see, and stop it. But they looked at me and just... drove away. Like nothing happened. Like they were driving past roadkill."

"Jesus, Ben..."

"They probably got home from their afternoon drive like nothing ever happened."

Eddie sits in the quiet, dim light of the clubhouse, wishing he knew the right thing to say. But Ben brightens suddenly, tightening the knot. "There we go! It's ready. Just... don't let Richie jump on it, okay? It'll fall."

"I'll try."

He climbs into the hammock as Ben and Bev wander around working on various little improvements to the clubhouse. He closes his eyes and tries not to imagine being one more name on the list of the missing and forgotten.

Eddie's lab partner wrinkles his nose when he slides into their shared table, barely on time. "Why do you smell like dish soap?"

"Long story," Eddie mumbles, trying to will his cheeks not to go red. He doesn't have anything to be embarrassed about, not really. Right?

The instructor starts talking then, and he's saved from having to make up a story by the long and droning explanation of the lab's safety procedures. Eddie takes immaculate and exhaustive notes, but he's barely present. His mind is a million miles away, trying to untangle the memories of Richie and Derry and these other kids. Every time he pulls another thread that he thinks might be the whole thing, it starts dissolving into the blank fog he used to assume was normal.

He walks back to his dorm room on autopilot, tossing his bag into his desk rather than unpacking it. He pulls one of the textbooks out, fully intending to do the reading for tomorrow. But his eyes keep straying over to the bulletin board over the desk, where he keeps the three postcards from Richie tucked into the frame. He pulls the first one, the one with Toddzilla on it, looking at it with a smile. ●□

He answers the door with his arm in a cast, while his mother is out for just a moment. Stan is standing there, dressed in a neatly pressed gray suit, and Eddie realizes in one sickening moment what today is. "Stan, I'm sorry, I'm sick, I wish I could come, but..."

Stan looks over at him, shaking his head a little. "I know. I know you'd be there, if you could."

"Maybe when I get this thing off? We could go to the arcade or something..." But his voice dies in his throat. All of that seems so hollow, after... after... after what?

Stan holds out a folded piece of notebook paper. "Richie wanted me to give this to you." Eddie's heart jumps in his chest. "Then he didn't. And then he did. And then I left before he could change his mind again," he says with a wry smile. Behind them, a car horn honks. "I have to go. But... read it, okay?"

Eddie watches him go, holding the piece of notebook paper close to his chest, like he might have to hide it. He doesn't unfold it until he's safely in

his room, the door open just enough for his mother's rules.

The note makes him want to laugh and cry in equal measure. It's wrinkled and covered in scratched out words and hastily covered doodles, like it was the only survivor of many attempts. Most of the page is taken up by what might be a T-Rex, or maybe Godzilla, or a very badly proportioned alligator, riding a surfboard on a massive wave. It has sunglasses and a set of flower patterned swim trunks. In the bottom corner, far outside any lines or rhyme or reason, someone has written in messy, scrawled handwriting.

Eddie,

this sucks. I'm sorry about your arm, and everything. are you coming to Stan's thing?

I miss you.

R.

Eddie traces his fingers over that last line over and over again. Part of him always wondered if Richie missed him when he wasn't around, or if he was just a shadow or another member of the audience.

But maybe Richie misses him like he does, like a physical ache, like a missing piece.



"Fuck," Eddie says to himself in the empty dorm room, still holding that postcard. "Fuck!"

I did like him. I do. He paces the room, wishing he had someone, anyone else to talk to about this. Someone he could lay all of this out on the table for, to make it into a story he can tell about himself, about both of them.

He doesn't fall asleep until far too late that night, playing and replaying different ways to tell Richie, different ways Richie could react. Different ways it could go, different ways he could fuck it up.

Maybe this is what was hidden in the fog inside his head.

Maybe this will make it so the fog doesn't matter anymore.

He practically sleepwalks through the rest of the next day, checking his watch and the clocks in the classroom, as if finding some kind of discrepancy between the two is going to make the day go faster. By mid-afternoon, his whole body is humming with tension, as if he's drunk four of Richie's black coffees. He taps his foot impatiently, looking over at the door as he waits for his theater professor to finish the lecture. He's out of there like a shot, before he can even hear what the reading for Friday will be.

It takes two seconds to get to the coffee shop. It takes ten years. Eddie isn't even sure how time works as a concept anymore, honestly. It's all starting to collapse in on itself, past and present and future swirling together in some wild mix of possibility.

The bell on the shop's door chimes faintly as Eddie pulls the door open. The radio is playing softly, some Radiohead song that Eddie can't be bothered to think more about. Richie is sitting on the counter in threadbare black jeans and one of his faded t-shirts, as usual. But now he's got Eddie's scarf wrapped around his neck, artlessly draped there, like he did it in a hurry, maybe even as he saw Eddie walking up the street.

"Listen up, asshole. You're not getting this back. I'm holding it hostage after you fucking Shamu splash zoned me this morning."

Eddie laughs, leaning up against the door for a moment, looking up at Richie. He's fucking ridiculous... of course he is. He wouldn't expect anything less.

"Why are you laughing at me? I'm serious. It's mine now. I don't even care that it's ugly and it itches like poison fuckin' oak! It's the principle of the thing."

Eddie steps forward. In his head, he rests one of his hands on Richie's hips at the counter and the other on Richie's cheek to pull him down into a long, lingering kiss.

In reality, Richie sees him coming and vaults himself over the counter, yelling "Home base! Home base!" Eddie blinks slowly, trying to readjust the situation. Then he walks around the counter, where Richie is holding the scarf up high over his head. "You're not respecting the rules of home base," he huffs, wagging a finger at Eddie.

Eddie wants to ask what game they're playing, but instead grabs for the scarf, only for Richie to switch it over to his other hand. They're both laughing, and Richie's backed himself up against the door to the kitchen. This time, he doesn't switch the scarf to his other hand fast enough, and Eddie is able to snatch it away, letting out a whoop of joy as he does.

"You're a tenacious little fucker," Richie says, looking down at Eddie with an admiring smile. And then Eddie remembers what he came here to do.

He takes the scarf and gently drapes it around Richie's neck, keeping hold of the rough yarn in his fists.

"Uh, what are you doing? You won. You get to keep it now. That was the whole point."

"It looks good on you."

"Most things do. I mean, I do have a strong sense of style, I like to call it, 'shit not even the Goodwill would take.'" Richie says it like a joke, but he's staring down at Eddie, his eyes owlshly wide behind his glasses.

Eddie smiles and tugs gently on the scarf, pulling Richie down for a kiss.

It's clumsy, a bit more like a collision than a kiss, but Richie doesn't pull away, instead letting his hands fall to rest on Eddie's waist. Eddie closes his eyes and just breathes in this moment. Richie smells like burned coffee and tastes faintly of blueberries, and he radiates the kind of warmth that Eddie never wants to leave.

Richie pulls away first, breathing hard and running a hand through

his shaggy hair. “Shit,” he says in a hoarse whisper, voice full of wonder.

“Rich? You okay?”

“Yeah, I... I'm fine, I just... I wish any other song were playing right now?”

Eddie laughs softly, resting a hand on Richie's cheek. “Wish it were REO Speedwagon?” he says, voice low and teasing.

“Oh fuck off,” Richie says, rolling his eyes even as he leans down for another kiss, pulling Eddie even closer.

It isn't perfect. But it's theirs.

Notes for the Chapter:

❖❖ Richie Tozier: Moment Killer ❖❖

i am constitutionally incapable of telling Radiohead songs apart, mostly because i refuse to.

6. Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

suggested listening for this chapter: "lighting candles" by the weepies.

i say "suggested listening," but what i actually mean is "the song i listened to on repeat while writing this."

also, you guys are some of the sweetest readers ever, honestly. your comments and encouragement honestly mean the world to me, thank you so much.

Richie wants to climb inside this moment and live in it forever like a snowglobe. Just Richie and Eddie, living under glass, looking out at the world together, from a place where none of it can hurt them.

The world has other plans. Richie pulls away the second the bell on the shop door rings, his hands going to his side. There's a muffled thud as Eddie drops below the counter, just out of sight. Richie swallows hard and flashes a grin at the man who's just walked through the door-- Trent, one of the security guys from the mall, probably the closest thing this place has to a regular after Eddie. He's a dick, but he thinks they're friends because Richie makes him laugh. "Hey, how's it going?"

"Another late night, you know how it is," the man says, shrugging. "Gonna need four black coffees to go, for the evening crew. Maybe a muffin."

"No problem, I'll get right on that. You grab a seat over there, okay? It'll be a second."

He goes through the motions as quickly as possible, willing himself not to look at Eddie hidden behind the counter. He's absolutely sure that if he looked, he'd lose his shit.

"You're not gonna be closing early again tonight, are you?"

Richie freezes. "Uh, what?"

"Came by the other night and you guys were all locked up."

Richie remembers locking the door and fleeing with Eddie-- he could be remembering any number of times, honestly. He's been able to get away with this for so long. But he does the only thing he can think of when he feels cornered. "I don't know, man. I was at my other job."

"What would this place even do without you, Rick?"

He delivers the coffee with shaky hands, stuffing them into his pockets as soon as possible to keep them out of sight. "Here you go, man. Hope it's a good one!"

"It won't be," the man says, heaving a put-upon sigh as he tosses a crumpled five dollar bill on the table. "Keep the change, kid."

Richie feels like he's breathing for the first time since that bell first rang. "'Keep the change...' fuckin' dickhead. Yeah, I'll be sure to think of you when I spend that fifty cents."

Eddie finally lets out a long-stifled laugh as he stands up and leans across the counter, resting on his elbows. "What's that guy's deal?"

"Him? One of those guys who wants to be a cop, but couldn't hack it. Now he thinks he's fuckin' Die Hard because he does a couple laps around the mall at night. But he's a friend of the manager, so... gotta play nice," Richie sighs, walking back over to the counter.

"He didn't even get your name right," Eddie says, and there's a feeling of warmth in Richie's chest at the other boy's indignant tone.

"Yeah, well, the less guys like that know about me, the better." Richie reaches out and tousles Eddie's hair. "Now get out from behind the counter before I put you to work."

Eddie lets out a little gasp of mock horror. "You'd really do that to me? In the middle of rush hour?" he says, gesturing to the deserted shop.

"Sink or swim, baby. The coffee business is cutthroat. Now scoot."

Eddie gets out from behind the counter, but he climbs back on the counter from the other side, grabbing a seat like he belongs there, like he doesn't want to be that far away from Richie. The thought makes something sing out deep inside Richie.

“So, what'd you learn in class today, smart kid?”

“What?”

“We already covered what I did today, which is sell coffee to dickheads, and... I mean, you were there,” he says, looking over at Eddie with a small smile, one almost too shy to show. “That's it, that's my day. Your turn.”

“I mean... nothing too exciting? I had my theater history lecture, it was kind of boring. Then I had my microbiology lecture, and calculus--”

“Can I ask a question that's gonna make me sound like a dumbass?”

“Sure, Rich,” Eddie says, leaning back to look at him, still smiling. Has he stopped at all since he came into the shop? That can't possibly have anything to do with Richie. That's not the kind of feeling he leaves in his wake.

“What the fuck is microbiology? Like, what do you do in that?”

“That's not a stupid question. And trust me, you've asked plenty of stupid questions before, so I'm not just saying that. It's... it's about organisms that are too small to see without like, microscopes. Fungi, bacteria, viruses, stuff like that.”

Richie remembers *standing at the bathroom sink at the middle school, watching the smaller boy scrub his hands under the water until they were raw and red and almost bleeding, wondering if there was anything he could say to take that fear away and make this stop.*

“Doesn't this shit freak you out?”

“Yeah, it did. Or... does. But it's not always like I thought. They're not all dangerous. It's like this whole other world just beyond what we can see, all these little parts that make the world run... plus, you

know, we always wear gloves in the lab. So that helps.”

There's something that lights up in Eddie's voice when he talks about the things he really cares about. Richie could chase that light forever. “So what'd you guys talk about today?”

“You ever wonder about how they invented the microscope?”

“Well, I always assumed that somebody catastrophically fucked up trying to build a telescope, but I'm probably wrong there.”

Eddie lets out a soft laugh. “Not as wrong as you could be.” He's a fountain of words when it comes to this stuff, and Richie could listen to him for hours. He *does* listen to him for hours. He may not understand it all, but the spark it ignites in Eddie is more than enough for him.

When nine o'clock rolls around, Richie is standing at the door, holding it open for Eddie. “You're such a gentleman, Richie.”

“All those years of reading my dad's stash of *GQ* have really paid off,” he scoffs as he locks up the shop.

“Really?”

“Yeah, they got everything you could ever want-- some bullshit clothes you can't afford, a fuck ton of cologne samples, and pictures of Timothy Hutton. What more do you need?”

“... who?” “

God, you have no culture, Eds, this is sad.”

“Asshole,” Eddie says, his voice impossibly fond. “Do you wanna come hang out over at my place? They still haven't reassigned me a roommate, I think they forgot.”

Everything in Richie wants to say yes, to spend another night in that tiny room surrounded by Eddie's books and Eddie's nerdy posters and *Eddie*, to kiss him again and do it right this time, to make a moment that no one else can take from them.

But the yes freezes in his throat, and the bullshit lie climbs over it easily, like it belongs there. "I can't, sorry. I gotta get up early in the morning, and then I have... a thing at the bar at night."

"A thing?"

"They're letting me just do a couple sets on Thursdays now-- turns out people actually like me pretty well when Donna's pouring Long Islands down their throats, who knew?"

"Oh. I wish I could come... I have class until late." And the thing is, Richie thinks he means it. Eddie really wants to spend a couple hours in a sour-smelling bar full of strangers to watch Richie say some more bullshit he's heard before.

"Nah, don't worry about it. You've already heard my best stuff anyway. Want me to walk you back?" That, at least, he can do. He can make sure Eddie makes it back home safe.

"Yeah, Rich. I'd like that."

"Then let's go. C'mon, time's a-wasting."

"We have plenty of time."

"You've got nerd shit to do, right? Learning about like, microbes and all that."

"And you've gotta practice, don't you? For your show?"

Richie laughs and shoves his hands in his pockets instead of wrapping an arm around Eddie's shoulders like he wants to. "Don't need to. I try out most of my best bits on you."

"But how do you know which ones are good?"

"Here's the secret," Richie says, dropping his voice low and leaning in close. "I have no fucking idea. But like I said-- by the time I get up there, they're drunk enough to laugh at anything."

Eddie hums softly to himself, like he's considering something. "I always liked it when you did the nature guy."

Richie glances down at him, baffled. "The what?"

"The nature guy! You know-- 'here we see the *Dorkus sapiens*, known colloquially as the Stanley, in his natural habitat, reading about other birds,'" Eddie says, in a truly atrocious British accent. Richie can't help but laugh.

"Jesus, Eds, leave the accents to me, okay?"

"It was for *authenticity*, Richie, you couldn't do accents for shit either!"

Richie is about to shake his head and write this as another one of the memories that will be lost to him forever when it bubbles up, almost fully formed.

They're in the hammock together, swinging gently back and forth, golden late evening light filtering through the rafters of the clubhouse. For once, Eddie isn't arguing about whose turn it is, content to lean up against Richie's side. It seems only fair that Richie entertains him in exchange, providing narration in a hushed British accent as Ben and Bev putter around making little improvements to the clubhouse.

*"And here we see *Ringwaldus sapiens* and *Hulko sapiens* engaged in yet another interminable mating dance. While he's built her an impressive nest for the harsh Maine winters, it still remains to be seen whether or not he'll seal the deal. The future of this strange subspecies remains ever more uncertain...."*

Eddie snickers behind his hand. In the swing nearby, Stan shoots the two of them a meaningful glance over the top of his copy of Nature. "You know, you called it a subspecies, but you actually mentioned two different ones. So that doesn't make sense if you're talking about the survival of just one--"

*Richie points at Stan with finger guns, and Eddie follows suit, grinning as he does. "See, shit like that? That is why I call you *Dorkus sapiens*."*

Eddie lets out another gale of laughter, loud enough to get Ben and Bev's attention, and Stan rolls his eyes and goes back to his magazine. Richie could swear that he's almost smiling as he does, as if at some little victory.

“Wait. The knockoff David Attenborough? That shit?”

Eddie nods eagerly. “Yes! Exactly! Oh my god, you used to do it all the time, it drove Stan crazy but I loved it.”

“Sounds like two equally good reasons to do it,” Richie says, shrugging. “Fuck. I can't believe you remembered that.”

“I mean... I can't believe I remember anything. It all seems so new to me. You know?”

Richie nods absently, his eyes focused on Eddie's dorm as it comes into view. It's late enough that there's not anyone around-- anyone with sense has taken shelter from the cold inside. And the streetlight just outside the building's side entrance is out-- has been out since November.

So he feels confident enough in the quiet dark of campus to grab for Eddie's hand just as they get to the door.

“Jesus, your hands are cold!”

“What? Of course my hands are fuckin' cold, it's freezing out, Eds,” Richie says, even as he's covering Eddie's hand with both of his, as if to protect him from the winter air.

“See, there's this magical invention, maybe you've heard of it... they're called fucking gloves, Rich.”

“If you were wearing gloves, you wouldn't be able to bitch about my hands. Checkmate, Eds,” he says, before leaning in to kiss Eddie again. He feels Eddie's hand at the back of his neck, pulling him in, like he doesn't want this kiss to end either.

But everything has to end eventually, and Eddie breaks away just enough to speak. “Are you sure you can't come up? Just for a little bit?”

Richie nods. “Yeah. I'm sure. Sorry, Eddie. But... you wanna stop by my apartment on Friday? Whenever you're done, I'll be around all day.”

Eddie's voice is delighted and surprised. "Really? The whole day?"

"Wonder of wonders, right?"

"I'll be there," Eddie says, squeezing Richie's hand gently before he pulls away to go inside. "Good night, Rich."

"Night, Eds. Hey, can you- can you let me know you got in safe? Just turn on the light or something, okay?"

Eddie smiles and nods. "Yeah, I can do that." With that, the door closes and locks behind him.

Richie lingers for a few moments, watching the row of windows on the fifth floor. Eddie's window is somewhere in the middle, maybe third or fourth from the left.

His heart jumps against his ribcage when the third window lights up with a yellow glow. Eddie appears in the window, waving down at him.

Richie can't hold back a grin as he waves back. Then he starts the long walk home alone.



His apartment is fucking freezing, even with the plywood covering the broken window. "Oh, this is bullshit," Richie mutters to himself. He goes back downstairs to rifle around in the landlord's piles of junk, finally returning with a heavy and rusted toolbox. The contents inside are a hopeless jumble, but he's at least able to find some heavy gloves and a utility knife. "That's a fuckin' start."

He pulls the plywood off and inspects the damage. It looks like someone threw a bottle at the window, or maybe their fist. He spent enough summers fixing these for his dad's contracting company-- he knows how to do this.

He takes the utility knife and scrapes at the putty around the broken pane. It's tough going in the cold, but eventually, he's able to start pulling out the broken glass.

As he holds one of the smaller shards in his gloved palm, he can see an image in his head-- *another jagged shard of glass, clutched in Bill's hand, all their blood dripping from it, his voice low and desperate in the sunlight, "swear--"*

Richie drops the shard he's holding, so jarred by that image. He could swear his hand is bleeding, that he can feel it trickling down the palm of his hand and soaking into the glove. He's so sure of this that he yanks the glove off his hand, expecting to see the wound there.

But he sits there on the floor of his kitchen, breathing hard as he stares at his clean, unscarred palm. He blinks again, like that's going to change what he sees. "Jesus Christ," he breathes, leaning his head back against the cabinet and closing his eyes to collect himself.

The apartment is freezing, but Richie is dripping with sweat as he pulls the last couple shards and starts sanding. It's well past midnight, but he has nothing to do until he goes to the Ugly Mug in the early evening. Might as well finish this part of it.

He replaces the plywood and then collapses fully clothed onto his bed. It occurs to him that he's probably made the cold situation in his apartment worse, if anything. "It'll be better when it's done," he mutters to himself, pulling the blankets closer around himself.

When he closes his eyes, he sees Eddie, silhouetted in the warm yellow light of his window, waving at him.



After a few hours of fitful sleep, Richie is the first one at the hardware store when it opens. He thinks that the guy cutting his new pane of glass might be the same drunk asshole who threw a piece of toast at him over the break, but he's not sure. Has he told Eddie that story yet?

Either way, the new pane fits perfectly when Richie carefully presses it into place. For the first time since he moved in here, there's sunlight in his kitchen.

In his head, he can see Eddie sitting at his kitchen table, one of his

books open in front of him, holding a mug of his almost-coffee, lit up by the best morning light. The image makes him smile.

Maybe I can do more than dream.

He heads to the shower, figuring that standing under his temperamental hot water is better than nothing while he waits for his apartment to heat up. He closes his eyes and lets the water wash over him, taking just a little more time to get lost in the blank spaces of his own head.



Richie and Eddie are waiting for the parade to start, trying to stake their claim on one of the sparse patches of shade. It's too hot for it, really, but Eddie's shoulder keeps bumping against his. "Where are we meeting everyone else?"

"I dunno," Richie says, leaning his head back against the bricks for a moment before realizing that's a mistake. "Wherever we find em, I guess."

Eddie frowns, but looks out at the parade, momentarily distracted by the noise of the parade's start. Richie glances around at the rest of the crowd. There's a boy and a girl standing on the sidewalk in front of them, sharing a cotton candy, smiling and laughing at some private joke. They'll probably go sit on a blanket by the Standpipe later and kiss under the fireworks. Like a real date.

Richie swallows to get rid of the sudden, jagged lump in his throat and glances over at Eddie. The other boy's face is lit up with delight at the colorful floats, and Richie wants to bottle up the brightness of that smile, carry it with him for when the nights get too dark.

He has two dollars in his pocket. He meant to save this for the arcade, but this seems more important.

"Hey, Eds, I'll be right back, okay?"

He races off before he can get an answer, to the little food carts scattered along Main Street. Two dollars doesn't go far, especially not on these things, and he stares around at his options, trying to figure out the perfect

thing.

He finally decides on a small ice cream cone for each of them, and he carries them back like precious cargo.

Eddie is standing at the same spot, but he's no longer looking at the parade. Instead, he's staring around at the crowd, starting to get that panicked look. "Richie? Where'd you go?"

Richie holds out one of the ice cream cones. "I told you I'd be right back."

"That doesn't tell me where you went!"

"I just.... you looked hot, so I thought I'd get something to cool us off."

"That's like pure sugar, Richie, it's gonna dehydrate us faster--"

"Look, do you want it or not?"

Eddie thinks about it for a moment, then takes it. "... thanks, Richie."

"Don't sweat it, Eddie Spaghetti."

As the parade winds down, they start to wander down Main Street in search of the rest of the losers. Their hands are so close together, close enough that they could touch.

Maybe this is as close as he'll ever get to a real date.

Notes for the Chapter:

i swear i'll get to the toast story at some point. i know literally no one was asking, but i will.

7. Chapter 7

Notes for the Chapter:

suggested listening for this chapter: "here in your arms" by hellogoodbye. y'all, i was NOT kidding about never updating my music tastes after my emo phase.

Every Tuesday and Thursday, between dinner and his evening class, Eddie calls his mother. It's always a long conversation, one he doesn't do much talking in, but that leaves him drained as though he's just run a marathon (something she's always insisted he could never do.)

Even the promise of tomorrow night isn't enough to keep him from slumping slightly against his desk as the dial tone sounds in his ear.

He can hear the TV blaring in the background when she answers, and for a moment, he hopes that she'll be too caught up in whatever she's watching to want to talk long. But that sounds clicks off as soon as she says his name. "Eddie! I called earlier, but I couldn't get through."

"I wasn't here, Mom. I was eating dinner, I just got in. How are you?"

And that opens the floodgates. He leans back as far as he can in his chair, letting her litany of daily aches and pains and slights wash over him, sifting through them and filing away any new information, responding dutifully with concern in the few gaps she leaves in the conversation. Anything off script gets him snapped at for interrupting.

There's a girl living down the hall from him. She's short and chubby, always dressed in colorful and baggy sweaters, souvenirs from places like Hilton Head Island and the Grand Canyon. Her room door is always open, and she greets everyone who walks by, her voice full of sunshine.

He can hear sometimes when she talks to her mom on the phone. How she tells her everything, how they know each other. How she

isn't afraid of her, or for her.

Eddie wants that. He wants his mother to know who he is, not who she wants him to be.

Finally, she asks the question, his only opening. "How's school?"

"It's... it's going really well, Mom. I like my new classes--microbiology especially, I'm starting to learn the stuff I'll need for med school--"

"Hopefully they're careful in those labs. You know how dangerous things like that can be--"

He lets out a small, disbelieving laugh. "Mom, this is a college biology lab. We're not working with Ebola or anything here..."

Her voice is sharp enough to cut when she replies. "Don't interrupt me!"

It's another bad night, he can tell by now, but against his better judgement, Eddie presses on. "It's all going really well. I think I'm gonna make the dean's list again. And... I made a friend." It's a half truth, one that already feels sour and heavy in his mouth, but he pushes on. It's a start, after all.

"A friend?"

"Yeah. He's been helping me out a lot. It's nice to have someone to talk to outside of class, you know?"

"Just don't get distracted. That's not what you're there for. You're there to study."

"I can... I can study and still have friends, Mom."

"A lot of kids tell themselves that, Eddie. A lot of kids that end up dropping out and wasting their lives. You'd be better off focusing."

Wasting their lives... Eddie knows what she would think of Richie. She wouldn't see how hard he's worked to build a life of his own, out of a world that's only tried to hurt him. She would only see the

secondhand clothes and the dead end jobs and the blank spot where his diploma should be.

She would only see what he didn't have and weave monsters out of those shadows. "Mom, I'm not going to do that."

"Of course not, Eddie. You know your limits. You're a smart boy."

Why does that feel so different coming from her? Why does that feel like an order and not a compliment?

"Mom, I've got to go, class starts soon."

"All right. I love you, Eddie."

"Love you, Mom."

He sets the phone back on the receiver and breathes in as deep as he can. The room only seems small like this after her phone calls. He lifts his head and looks at the Toddzilla postcard again, focusing on those scribbled lines.

He smiles and goes to grab his bag, but not before touching the postcard. It's like a good luck charm, a reminder that the world isn't as full of ugliness as she thinks.



He can't be much older than ten in this memory. It's one of Richie's birthday parties, on one of the first nice days of spring, and all the other kids are on the trampoline. Eddie's mother had taken one look at that thing, full of kids bouncing and screaming and laughing and made her declaration: "Death trap!"

And then she went to hold court at the table on the patio, leaving Eddie to watch as all the kids played and laughed, Richie in his element in this chaos, bouncing twice as high as anyone else.

He imagines that astronauts on the moon must feel like this, watching the world go on without them, as if they were never even there.

Mrs. Tozier sits down on the bench beside him. "Hi, Eddie."

"Hi."

"Do you want to get on the trampoline?"

He shakes his head. "I'm not allowed. My mom says I'll get hurt."

"Oh." There's a long pause filled with the laughter of the other kids, Richie loudest among them. "Well, Richie wanted you to come play. But I'm sure he'll understand. Can you help me with something else, then?"

Eddie tilts his head curiously. What kind of project does an adult need a kid's help with?

She holds out the Polaroid camera slung around her neck. "I wanted to get some pictures of Richie with everybody, but darn it, I'm really busy getting the cake ready. Do you think you can help me?"

Eddie nods, even though he isn't sure. "Okay."

"It's not too hard to use, just look through here and press down-- there we go!"

"Thanks, Eddie. You're a great help." She smiles at him, patting him gently on the shoulder. He still isn't sure this is a real job, but it's better than being stuck without anything to do.

He watches the first picture he takes develop slowly, captivated by the way color slowly floods into the darkness. It's just a simple, boring photo of the Tozier's backyard, with one of the legs of the trampoline poking into it at the right corner, but he took it. He captured that moment forever.

He wanders toward the trampoline, and Richie spots him immediately, rocketing past two other kids towards him. "Eddie! Eddie, are you coming up?"

"I can't."

Richie pouts even as he bounces in place. "Are you sure? Your mom's busy talking, she might not even see..."

Eddie shakes his head quickly. Defying his mother like that, right in front of her... that's too much to even think about. "And your mom asked me to take pictures," he says, holding up the camera.

"What? She never lets me have the camera!"

"Probably because you'd just make a bunch of pictures making weird faces," Eddie says.

In response, Richie pulls a truly grotesque face, eyes crossed, tongue lolling out of his mouth. The camera flashes, and Eddie laughs with Richie as it develops.

After cake, as the day starts to get cold and cloudy, with rain threatening overhead, the other kids trickle away. Soon, it's just Eddie and Richie, standing in their stocking feet, waiting for their chance to get back outside, the camera still slung around Eddie's neck.

"You should ask your mom if you can stay!"

"What?"

"My mom said I could have someone stay over for my birthday. You should stay!"

"I don't know if my mom'll let me..."

Richie grins at him. "Don't worry. My mom'll ask her. And she likes you."

"Really?"

"Yeah! She thinks you're quiet. Don't worry, I'm not gonna rat you out."

It takes some persuasion on Mrs. Tozier's part, but Eddie's Mom leaves without him for the first time in his life. She comes back a few minutes later, but only to drop off a bag and reiterate all her rules to Mrs. Tozier. But the two of them don't even listen. They're already tearing off to their own little adventures, the first of many.

The sky turns dark and gloomy, with a storm on the way, but Eddie and Richie go out to the trampoline again, stealing another couple of moments before the storm hits. Eddie snaps one more picture of Richie on the

trampoline before the rain starts and they run inside. Richie pulls off his jacket and drapes it over Eddie, to protect him from the rain even in that brief run back to the house.

It occurs to Eddie that he might have a best friend after all.

The two boys sit in captivated silence at the coffee table, watching the picture bloom on the black film. Eddie managed to capture Richie suspended in the air with his arms outstretched, eyes closed and smiling against the dark sky. If you didn't know, if you weren't there with him when it happened, you'd swear he was flying.



Friday passes so slowly that Eddie starts to wonder if he's somehow broken the very concept of time. It feels like he's aged ten years in the time it takes for him to finally climb the steps to his room and start tossing things in his backpack-- not much, just a change of clothes, a toothbrush, one of his books, all just in case.

Just in case. His cheeks go a little red at the thought.

When he pulls the book off the shelf, he hears something rattle around behind it, and he looks at it curiously. There's a little disposable camera sitting there, where he'd tossed it after one of his well-meaning distant relatives sent it in a care package ("you'll want to hang onto these memories, Edward! It all goes by so fast!") It's lighter and more fragile feeling than the Polaroid camera he remembers, but there's still 26 exposures left.

After a moment's consideration, he throws that into the bag too. Now he does have something he wants to hang onto, moments he wants to keep forever.

In case they disappear again.



When Eddie walks into the apartment, he finds Richie sprawled across that ugly yellow couch, his long legs kicked up on the arm. He's got a comic book in his hands, but he sets that aside as soon as he sees Eddie, scrambling off the couch and walking towards him, pulling him into a hug.

"Hey! How'd your show go?"

Richie shrugs. "It was all right. You know, the usual: bunch of drunk assholes who would laugh even if I just stood there."

"Maybe you should try that next time. It'd be a lot less work for you."

"Wow, who's the funny guy now," Richie huffs, even as he leans down to press a kiss to Eddie's cheek. Eddie smiles and places a hand on the other boy's face, turning him just enough to kiss him properly. He can feel Richie smiling into the kiss, and he can't help smiling himself.

They both end up on the couch, Eddie laying his head on Richie's lap. He's smiling up at Richie when the other boy props the comic book up on his face.

"Hey!"

"What? You're right here, it's pretty convenient."

"Did you just invite me over to be furniture?" Eddie says, voice a little indignant underneath the newsprint.

"I mean, it's not like I've got a ton," Richie says, gesturing to the mostly bare apartment. But he lifts the pages away from Eddie's face. "Hey, do you like movies?"

"Yeah, why?"

Richie starts talking, in that too fast, rattling way he has when he gets nervous. "There's this shitty little theater a couple blocks from here. Nothing first run, and I don't think they've switched out the popcorn in the machine since the Kennedy assassination, but you can see movies for a dollar. It's never crowded. You wanna go?"

Eddie nods. "Yeah. That sounds fun."

Richie puts the comic book aside and pushes gently at Eddie's shoulder. "All right. Let's go."

"Now?"

"No time like the present, right?"

Eddie laughs and gets off the couch, pulling his jacket on. While Richie is digging through his dresser for something, he goes to his backpack and pulls out the camera and slips it into his pocket.



The theater is in a little strip mall, tucked between a defunct shoe store and a Chinese restaurant. There are two options for them-- *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* and *The Getaway*, neither of which Eddie has heard of.

"You wanna see *New Nightmare*? It'll be like old times. Just you, me, and Freddy Krueger."

"Sounds good," Eddie says, gazing around the deserted lobby as Richie tears off to buy their tickets. There's a couple of arcade games in one corner, all marked with handmade out of order signs. It feels familiar to him, but he can't place why at first, not until he sees the game in the middle. Even as worn and weathered as this machine is, even with the screen dark and papered over, he'd know it anywhere.

He pulls out his camera to take a photo, looking through the viewfinder at the abandoned machines. He remembers *spending hours at Richie's side while he played Street Fighter, listening while he explained his strategy. He didn't understand most of it, and he never could manage to win, but spending time with Richie was enough, somehow.*

Richie reappears at his side, holding their ticket stubs and a box of candy, already opened as he offers it to Eddie. "You into photography now?"

Eddie flashes him a sheepish smile and puts the camera away. "A

little bit, yeah. You used to play that game, right?”

Richie looks at the dead games for a moment, following where Eddie points, but there's no recognition in his gaze. “What, *Street Fighter*?”

“Yeah. You used to play it all the time. For a while you practically lived in the arcade, your mom kept threatening to have your mail forwarded there...”

“Seems like the kinda shit I'd be into. You wanna go in?” Richie says, wrapping an arm around Eddie's shoulders.

“Good idea. Wouldn't wanna get stuck with bad seats in this crowd.”

Richie just snorts and leads them back to the first auditorium. It's already almost dark in there, even though there's nothing playing on the screen yet. He picks a pair of seats in the second to last row, ushering Eddie in with a bow. “After you.”

The seats are worn out and torn up, and it smells a little like someone's long neglected attic, and the floor feels faintly sticky under his shoes, but that doesn't matter much when Richie slips a hand into his, tangling their fingers together. He rests his head on Richie's shoulder, smiling when he feels Richie kiss the top of his head.

Heather Langenkamp is arguing with someone on the screen when Eddie feels Richie shifting around, and he tilts his head slightly, so that he's looking into his dark brown eyes. His heart is pounding so hard that it feels dangerous somehow, like he's on the edge of something he doesn't have the words for yet.

Richie presses a kiss against his forehead, his cheek, his lips. Eddie closes his eyes and rests his other hand at the back of Richie's hair, fingers curling in his shaggy hair. On impulse, coming from somewhere deep in the tightly coiled parts of his brain he hasn't had time to untangle, Eddie opens his mouth into the kiss, tasting chocolate and caramel and bright and bitter coffee that underlies everything about Richie.

The other boy lets out a soft, sharp sound, as if he's been startled, but he only breaks away long enough to take one deep, shaky breath, still

resting his forehead against Eddie's. They keep kissing through the whole movie, and Eddie can't bring himself to give a damn about the screams and growls echoing down from that other world. This is what matters. Being here, with Richie, close like this.

Richie's lips are pressed up against Eddie's jawline when the credits roll and the lights go from dark to merely dim. He lets out a sigh and disentangles from Eddie, giving his hand one more squeeze before he does. "I thought there was more movie than that."

Eddie laughs, breathing in deep as he tries to will his face to be less red. "Yeah... what even happened in the end?"

"Same thing as always-- she beat the monster and went home."

Is that what we did? Is that what happened when we stepped back out into the sunlight on shaking legs, taking big greedy gulps of the first clean air in days? Did we go home?

But the thought pops and dissolves like a soap bubble before Eddie can fully grasp it.

When they walk outside, there's snow falling hard and fast, blanketing the streets of town. Without even thinking, Eddie pulls out his camera and snaps a photo of Richie standing in the cold quiet and looking up at the sky, the yellow lights of the parking lot turning gold around him.

"Hey, shutterbug, let's go, it's fuckin' cold!"

Eddie rolls his eyes and puts the camera back, jogging to Richie's side. The wind picks up as they're walking back to Richie's, hard enough to knock Eddie into him, and for the last block, it feels like they're in a bad movie about the Arctic, huddling for warmth like penguins.

Once they're back at Richie's, shedding coats and scarves in an untidy heap at the door, Richie looks out the window, letting out a low whistle. "Jesus, they weren't kidding about this fuckin' storm, huh? Looks like it might actually be a blizzard like they were talking about on the radio."

"Yeah," Eddie murmurs, recovering the camera from his jacket pocket. He looks out through the viewfinder at Richie, leaned up against the window, the snow melting on his dark and curly hair. He looks lost in thought, like he's looking far beyond the snowy streets at something only he can see, something that brings a small smile to his mouth.

Richie turns toward Eddie at the sound of the snap, pulling a face. "What, you're gonna be the paparazzi in my apartment now? I thought I had to get famous before I had to deal with that shit."

"I thought it would be a good picture."

"Well, I hate to disappoint you, Eds, but I'm in it, so that's not gonna work out for you," the other boy says with a casual shrug.

Eddie wonders sometimes if Richie believes all the jokes he tells about himself. The thought makes something ache deep in his chest, and he steps up next to Richie to their lips together, sweet and gentle this time. "No. I think it'll be great," he murmurs. Then he steals Richie's glasses and puts them on, looking at a newly blurry world through the thick glass. "How do I look?" he says, smiling up at Richie's blurry outline.

"Well, you're the one wearing my glasses, so I have no fucking clue. You usually look cute though, so that seems like a safe bet, even with those things on your face."

Richie takes hold of Eddie's wrist and uses the opportunity to steal the camera out of Eddie's hand. "Your turn," he says, lifting the camera to his face, that beautifully crooked smile playing on his lips.

Eddie laughs and twists away, backing away across the apartment. "No, come on, Rich."

"Hey, man, if I'm uglying up your camera, then you gotta be in here too, to balance things out. That's science, baby."

"You know you only say that when you're talking complete bullshit, right, Rich?"

"Bullshit is just science we don't understand yet, I'm pretty sure Obi

Wan Kenobi or some other nerd you like said that--”

“Richie, what are you talking about?”

Richie heaves an enormous sigh and scrubs a hand over his face and into his hair. “You're really gonna make me say it out loud, Eds?”

“Say what,” Eddie says, as the back of his legs hit Richie's bed.

“That I want a picture of you.”

Eddie freezes for a moment, staring at Richie. There's definitely red in his cheeks, and something raw and vulnerable in his eyes. In a second, he makes his choice, folding up the glasses and setting them aside on the bedside table.

He pulls at his soft coral sweater, lifting it up over his head to reveal the white button up underneath, closing his eyes as he hears the camera shutter click. He sits down on the bed and looks at Richie, biting his lip. The camera clicks again. He has no idea what he's doing, if this is the right thing or not, but he starts to unbutton his white shirt.

The camera only clicks one more time before Richie drops it on the stack of milk crates he uses as a bedside table and goes to the bed beside Eddie, gently pushing the shirt down and off.

They sit there in the quiet of the apartment for a moment, breathing in almost perfect sync. Then Richie pulls him in for a kiss so desperate and messy that it knocks the breath out of Eddie's chest. Eddie goes for the hem of Richie's black t-shirt, pulling it up over his head. Without really thinking about it, he climbs into Richie's lap, tracing his fingertips along the sharp curve of his cheekbone, then presses his lips to that patch of skin just below his ear. He smiles as Richie whispers “*fuck*,” in a tone like wonder and keeps trailing his lips down the other boy's neck and throat, closes his eyes and reveling in the salty-sweet taste of his skin. Every part of this is electric, lighting up parts of him he barely knew existed.

He never wants to stop touching Richie. He wants to learn every way Richie wants to be touched and held and keep doing it forever, until

the universe collapses around them.

“Fuck-- Eddie-- Eddie, wait--”

He blinks quickly and pulls back, leaving a hand on Richie's neck. “Rich? You okay?”

“I... yeah?” It sounds too much like a question, and Eddie gently strokes a thumb over Richie's cheek.

“You sure?”

Richie glances away, chewing at his lower lip nervously. “Can we-- can we stop? I'm sorry, I like this, I do, I just-- I'm not... ready?” He winces even as he says it, like he's embarrassed even to say it.

Eddie slides off Richie's lap and sits beside him, resting a hand on his knee and giving him what he hopes is a reassuring squeeze. “Okay, I'm sorry, Richie.”

Richie shakes his head and buries his head in both his hands, hiding the furious blush of his cheeks. “It's not your fault. God, I feel like I'm in a fucking after school special, this sucks.”

Eddie can't help a little laugh, kissing him on the cheek. “It's okay, Richie.”

“It is *not*. I feel like some washed up soap star is gonna bust in, turn a chair around backwards, and then have a man to man chat with me about leaving room for Jesus,” Richie groans, even as he lays back against the bed, leaving room for Eddie beside him.

Eddie rests his head on Richie's chest, listening as his heartbeat starts to calm and slow. The other boy's fingers come to rest in his dark hair.

“Where'd you learn to kiss like that, anyway, Eds?”

“I read a lot of books,” he says, before he can catch himself.

Richie laughs so long and loud it takes another kiss to shut him up.

Notes for the Chapter:

folks i have to say, i was not expecting such a robust response re: the toast story. inquiring minds will have to wait, because as it turns out, gotta lotta feelings about photography!

also, thanks again for all of the lovely comments. you truly warm my heart. it's a weird sensation!

8. Chapter 8

Notes for the Chapter:

suggested listening for this chapter: "i get weak" by Belinda Carlisle.

time is a construct and Tuesday is the weekend now.

also, sorry this is so wildly late.

also, thank you for all of your wonderful comments-- i am continually blown away by how sweet and supportive all of you are. absolute rays of sunshine.

also, toast squad, assemble!

The weekend feels like a treasure Richie's stolen from someone else's life. The snow doesn't let up for most of Saturday, and they spend it inside, Eddie studying from his enormous textbook while Richie tries to reconstruct the crates he's stolen from the liquor store into a reasonable sturdy shelf. Every once in a while, he hears the camera click, as Eddie takes another picture.

Snow be damned, he still has to work on Saturday night, and he trudges there and back through what must be at least a foot of snow, freezing his ass off the entire way. But when he gets home at 2 am, Eddie is on his couch, dozing off with an enormous biology textbook on his chest.

Richie stands there in his doorway for a moment, just looking down at the other boy, his heart caught in his throat. Even in sleep, there's a faint line between his brows, as if he's trying to solve the world's problems in his dreams. He looks like he belongs there, perfectly at home, even on this ugly and uncomfortable couch, his hair tousled into sleepy waves.

This could be your life, if you weren't so fucking scared.

He crosses the room and brushes some hair away from Eddie's eyes, before pressing an icy cold hand to his forehead.

The other boy wakes up with a gasp, like he's been electrocuted. "Jesus *fucking* Christ!"

Richie laughs, leaning in for an apology kiss. "And that was with gloves on the whole way, believe it or not. How's your studying going?"

Eddie sighs and closes the heavy book. "It's not. What time is it?"

"Time for you to get off that couch before it molds your spine into a question mark. I'm gonna take a shower to thaw out, okay?"

Eddie just yawns in response as he wanders over to the bed. Richie grabs a pair of boxers and a t-shirt out of the clean basket and retreats to the shower.

He lets out a sigh as the water pours over him, leaning his forehead against the cool tile walls as it carries away the stink of spilled beer and old food. He thinks about Eddie, just a few feet away through the wall, all sleep tousled and warm and so fuckin'... beautiful. It feels strange to say that about anyone, but Richie doesn't think he's ever been able to come up with another word to describe the way Eddie's brown eyes drink up all the light around them and gives it back in honey gold, or the line of his throat when he throws back his head and really laughs, or the way he bites his lip when he's about to do something reckless enough to knock the breath out of Richie's lungs.

"Fuck, you've got it bad, dumbass," he mutters to himself.

Granted, he's just getting to know the guy, but he's pretty sure his thirteen year old self would kick his ass for chickening out last night. Hell, he kind of wants to kick his own ass for that.

But you don't know what the fuck you're doing. He's gonna realize it's a mistake. If he hasn't already.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," he mutters, scrubbing at his body with an almost vengeful determination. He wished that voice inside his head didn't sound so much like him. It would be easier to ignore. He could write it off, like he does with the hecklers at the Ugly Mug.

When Richie walks back out into the apartment, toweling off his

shaggy mop of hair, Eddie is already asleep on the bed. Or mostly asleep. When Richie slides into bed behind him and carefully drapes an arm around his waist, Eddie makes a soft, pleased noise in the back of his throat and scoots backwards, pressing his body against Richie's.

He smiles and presses a kiss into Eddie's hair. "You're cute," he murmurs.

"Shut up and go to sleep."



Stan's the kind of kid who gets trusted with grown-up errands. Everything about him screams "responsibility," and he nods with solemn sincerity as he takes direction, as if he's being entrusted with the nuclear codes and the crown jewels and not the water bill and his mother's dry cleaning. The kinds of things nobody with any sense would ask Richie to do.

And because he's a terrible friend, he drags Richie along for the ride. "I'm not gonna carry your mom's clothes," he says, scuffing his sneakers along the sidewalk.

"You won't have to," Stan says absently as he drops the bill into the little slot outside the utility office.

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

"What does dry cleaning even mean, anyway?"

Stan shrugs. "Don't know. But they drop stuff off for it every single week."

"And they just now figured out it's on your way home from school?"

"I told them it was."

Richie groans. "That's a rookie move, Stan! You're only gonna get saddled with more stuff to do now."

"I like helping."

He scoffs, swinging his backpack onto his shoulders again. "Is there a dry cleaning merit badge?"

Stan doesn't dignify that with a response. Instead, he opens the door to the little shop, holding it open for Richie. He goes up to the counter, leaving Richie at the window. For some reason, it always takes forever to hand over a bag of clothes, so Richie makes himself comfortable, sitting up on the windowsill to watch the street.

He's never really noticed the buildings across the street. They're just a couple of one story brick office buildings, newer than most of the buildings in downtown Derry. They're even more boring than most of the other buildings, and normally his eyes slide right past them without even noticing. Today, for the first time, he reads the sign on the building closest to the door for the first time. Dr. Todd, Pediatrician.

He's about to turn and make some dumb joke to Stan, but it melts away before it can even leave his mouth. Because Eddie walks out the door of that building, pausing for a moment to stuff something into his fanny pack before stepping down into the sidewalk, walking with that familiar determination, like he's absolutely set on getting to his goals, even if the goal is as simple as the end of the block. Richie waves without even thinking about it. Eddie hadn't been in school that day, and he'd been inside all weekend, not even allowed to come to the phone. It feels like Richie hasn't seen him in a million years, and there's been an empty ache in the spot where Eddie usually stays.

Eddie stops, squinting across the street until he sees Richie. Then he waves back, a wide grin breaking across his face. He goes and waits at the crosswalk, despite the deserted street, and then runs toward Richie.

Something flutters against the inside of Richie's ribcage, like a moth caught at a screen door. He goes out the door to meet Eddie, and that fluttering only gets wilder, more out of control.

"Hey! You're one of the cool kids now, Eddie Spaghetti? You're cutting school?"

Eddie stares at him for a moment, brow furrowed in confusion. "What?"

"You weren't at school today. I thought you skipped."

"Oh. No, I had a buncha doctor's appointments. My mom likes to put them all on one day, so I don't miss as much school. This is the last one," he says, with a little sigh of relief. "But I didn't cut school."

"It's a joke, Eds."

Eddie laughs, then pauses, confused again. "Eds?"

"It's a nickname. You've heard of those, right?"

"Eddie is already a nickname."

"Yeah, but I didn't pick that one. It's this or Eddie Spaghetti, make your choice."

Eddie rolls his eyes, but he's still smiling. "Oh wait! I just remembered," he says, before going to rummage in his fanny pack. He carefully pulls out one of Richie's comic books. It's a little bit worse for the wear after being shoved in there, but that doesn't even matter to Richie. "I really liked this one. Do you have any more?"

Their fingertips brush as Eddie hands the book back, and Richie feels oddly warm all over, even on this cool fall day. He scrambles to answer Eddie's question, and for the first time in his entire life, he feels like he's talking too fast. "Hell yeah, I've got more, I've got Daredevil coming out my ears. Elektra too, if you want. You gonna be at school tomorrow?"

"Yeah!"

"Perfect, I'll bring em."

They stand there for a moment, out in the cool autumn air. Richie, for the first time he can remember, doesn't know what to say. Things have been... different, since they came back to school, and Richie can't put his finger on why. He keeps thinking about Eddie, at times when it doesn't really make sense to. Like when that one song comes on the radio, or when he sees people walking down the street holding hands. He can't stop looking at Eddie's eyes, like he'll find the answers somewhere there.

Eddie glances over his shoulder, like he's nervous. "My mom'll be out any

second. I gotta go. You'll bring the comics, right?"

Richie thinks with suddenly and absolute clarity that he would haul his entire comics collection to school in his little red wagon if it would make Eddie smile. "Yep. I'll bring em for you, Eds."

"Don't forget!"

"I won't!"

Stan emerges from the shop, carefully carrying the plastic dry cleaning bags. "Hey, Eddie."

"Bye, Stan!" Eddie says, before darting back over the crosswalk to wait on the steps in front of the office. His mother emerges just a moment after that, and she ushers him into her waiting station wagon.

"You ready, Richie?"

"Yeah," he says quietly, glancing back across the street at Eddie, seeing just a glimpse of dark hair before Eddie vanishes inside its cavernous depths.

When they were in second or third grade, their teacher read Hansel and Gretel to them out of an enormous old book, showing them the elaborate illustrations with a solemn expression. The engraving of the witch opening the door of the candy house for the children as she grips the key to the cage in her hand has stuck in his brain for years now.

Whenever Mrs. Kaspbrak takes Eddie's hand, Richie imagines an iron key clutched in her other fist.

He sighs softly as the station wagon pulls away and turns a corner to vanish out of sight. "You ready to go?"

"Yeah, let's get out of here, Stan."

He's too lost in thought to notice that Stan is looking at him curiously, as if he's starting to put some puzzle pieces together. By summer time, he'll wear that look a lot, for Richie and for two kids they haven't met yet.

Stan was always too smart for his own good, wasn't he?



The grind and scrape of a snow plow outside the window is what wakes them both up. Or... it wakes Richie up, at least. Eddie responds to it with an outraged groan, but he takes the rest of the blankets and burrows further underneath them, jamming a pillow over his head for good measure. Richie, now left without any blankets, decides to just suck it up and get out of bed. He goes to the kitchen and starts pulling out ingredients for pancakes. By the time he gets all this done, maybe Eddie will be up and functional.

He turns on the radio to play softly while he cooks. After the traffic report, the DJ plays a song he hasn't heard in years, a woman crooning, *"I get weak when I look at you/weak when we touch/I can't speak when I look in your eyes..."*

All at once, he remembers *being twelve years old, lying on his bed while this song played, humming along with his eyes closed and wondering why he keeps picturing Eddie, standing close enough to touch their foreheads together, like in the cover of those paperbacks his mom checks out from the library in bulk.*

He can't help but laugh at himself, past and present. No one ever accused him of being particularly smart.

He sings along as he stirs the pancake batter, losing himself in the music and the task. As the song ends, he hears Eddie's voice, still cloudy with sleep. "I thought you said you couldn't sing."

"I can't," Richie says as he pours the batter into the pan. "That's all my good pal Belinda Carlisle. You hungry?"

Eddie settles into his usual seat, one of the blankets still wrapped around his shoulders. "Starving. What are you making?"

Richie makes a big show of flipping the pancakes, the way he'd never do if he was on the line at the diner. "Another one of those great American dumbass proof classics."

Eddie smiles up at him, leaning his head against his hand. "You know you've got flour all over your shirt, right?"

Richie sighs. "Always a critic."

"Do you have coffee?"

"No, I ran out, but I've got half a carton of creamer in there, which is basically what you drink anyway."

"I don't put that much creamer in it."

"One of these days, I'm gonna pour you an entire mug of creamer. Ten bucks says you're not even gonna notice, Eds."

"That's gross, Richie," Eddie says, even as he laughs. .

"You're gross."

"Wow, you're really on your game today, Rich."

"Oh, fuck off," Richie says, rolling his eyes. He deftly plates a stack for Eddie and sets it in front of him, flourished with a little bow. "Bon appetit, asshole."

"Wow, no wonder they love you at the diner. You say that to all your customers?"

"Oh, I'm not allowed to wait tables anymore," Richie says cheerfully, before stuffing his face.

Eddie tilts his head curiously, with a trace of concern in his furrowed brow. "What? Why?"

"Oh, did I not tell you this? Yeah, they had me cover Charlie's tables on her smoke break a while back. And this drunk asshole at one of em kept spilling shit everywhere. The third time, when he dumped the syrup pitcher on the floor, I asked him if he was going for distance or accuracy. That's when he started Frisbeeing slices of toast at my head. With surprising accuracy, for a guy who was like three sheets to the wind, so I guess that answered my question--"

“He threw things at you?”

“It was just toast. And he got banned for life. They didn't even do that to the guy that robbed the place. Then Charlie told me to work on my people skills and get back on the line.”

“That's fucked up, Richie--”

He reaches out and rests a hand on Eddie's. “Hey. Don't worry about it. I've been through worse. They had my back. And no one's asked me to wait tables since, and that's the real victory.”

Eddie laughs, but there's something far away in the sound. Richie wanted the story to be funnier than that. It needs some work. “So when are you going back?”

“Probably in a little bit. I gotta shower, and then go to the library while it's still open.”

Richie pulls a mock disgusted face. “The library? On purpose?”

Eddie rolls his eyes. “Yeah. I gotta find articles for a paper. A couple papers, actually. The library's nice, it's not like Derry's.”

“You remember that place? Cause I don't, I'm pretty sure I never set foot inside. It's like if a vampire walks into a church, I'll just fuckin' explode--”

Eddie shakes his head, and his brow is furrowed, deep in the process of remembering. “It had all those windows, but it was always so dark. You didn't like it. You said it was creepy. And those guys used to wait outside sometimes, for people walking out.”

Something deep in Richie's gut twists like a knife edging dangerously close to an old wound. “What guys?”

“They were bullies. I can't remember their names... maybe you do?”

Get out!

Richie shakes his head quickly, maybe too quickly. He can hear the words, a deafening roar, louder than his own heartbeat, but he can't

put a name or a face with it. Just a voice. A voice that threatens to overpower everything else in his head. “Nah. Nah, I don't remember shit, sorry. Maybe that's a good thing.” He pushes his empty plate away from the table, glancing over towards the window.

“Yeah. They were fucked up,” Eddie says quietly. Then he gathers all the dirty dishes and goes to wash them in the sink.

“Aw, come on, Eds, you don't have to do that.”

“I want to,” he says, as the water starts to run. “Besides, you cooked, it's only fair.” Richie opens his mouth to argue, but he recognizes that stubbornness. He'll let that go. For now, anyway.

Instead, he goes out into the rest of the apartment and starts picking up the debris of the weekend and put it where it goes. Comic books back on his makeshift shelf, scattered clothes back in the clean or dirty hamper, coats on the makeshift hooks by the door.

He pulls his ticket stub out of his coat pocket. He means to throw it away, but he can't. Instead, he pulls a paper clip out of the other pocket and carefully clips it to the underside of the Times Square postcard. He doesn't know how to explain what he's doing. It's not like he's gonna start a fucking scrapbook.

But he doesn't feel like he can rely on his brain to keep the shit that matters safe. And this... whatever they're doing together, it matters.

Maybe these scraps will help. Maybe he can look at them and remember how happy he was.

Eddie's scarf is draped around the bedpost, and Richie carefully unwinds it and puts it with Eddie's coat and hat, folding them neatly (well, as nearly as Richie can manage, anyway) on the bed, next to his backpack.

When Eddie emerges from the shower, he looks around the neat apartment, nodding like he's impressed. Richie stops staring at him long enough to make a wiseass remark, which, really, is a credit to his ability to multitask. Or something. “What? Not all of us live in fuckin' squalor, Eds.”

"Brave words from a guy who owns one towel," he says, brandishing the damp towel for a second before tossing it over to the basket. He misses.

Richie scoffs and flops down onto the couch. "I'm one guy, Eddie. Why would I need more than one towel?"

Eddie stares at him, eyes full of a mixture of horror and dismay. "Jesus Christ," he mutters, covering his face with his hands for a moment.

Richie makes a mental note to pick up some more towels.

Eddie puts the scarf aside again after putting on his coat and hat. He's rummaging in his backpack, trying to make everything fit when Richie steps up close to him, picking it up and holding it out.

"Hey, don't forget--"

He shakes his head quickly, dark hair falling into his eyes. "No, I'm not forgetting. I want you to have it."

"What?"

"It looks good on you. And that jacket isn't warm enough."

"My jacket is fine. And it looks cool," Richie absolutely does not whine.

"Just keep it, okay," Eddie says, resting a hand on Richie's cheek. When he leans in to kiss him, the other boy smells like his cheap sour apple shampoo, and that-- that makes something short circuit, deep in the rat's nest that is Richie's brain.

He nods slowly, pulling Eddie back up for one more kiss. And another. And another, this one with his hands on Eddie's hips.

"Rich, I gotta go," he says, laughing softly, although he makes no move to get away.

"Yeah, I know."

“You'll be at the coffee shop on Wednesday, right?”

Richie nods, too busy looking into Eddie's soft brown eyes to speak.

“I'll see you then, okay?”

“Yeah, Eds.”

He steals one more kiss at the doorway, and he watches Eddie walk through the freshly plowed streets, as determined as ever.



They're supposed to be watching a scary movie in Richie's basement, but neither of them are really paying attention. Stan has one of Richie's comic books, and Richie keeps fitfully moving around on the couch, trying to look at the screen and not the spot in the middle where Eddie is supposed to be.

He looked almost sick with guilt when he told Richie at lunch. “My mom wants me to stay home this weekend. After that kid disappeared, she's really worried, she won't even let me ride the bus home...”

Richie couldn't control his face, couldn't make a joke. He couldn't do anything, and it turned out that was the wrong answer too. Eddie went bright red too, and he ducked his head and ran away.

He hasn't seen him since.

Richie is hanging upside down off the couch, his legs dangling over the back, as if this will make him pay attention to the movie.

“Hey Richie, can I ask you something?”

“Pretty sure you just did.”

“Richie.”

“Oh my god, fine, Stan. Ask. But I don't know what's going on in this movie either. I think there are zombies, that's all I've got.”

“It's not about the movie.”

“Okay, then what?” “Do you wish Eddie was here?”

Richie wrenches himself back up onto the couch, scrambling backward until his back hits the arm of the couch. Every alarm bell in his head is ringing too loudly for him to hear his own thoughts. This is it, this is when I ruin everything--

“What?”

“Do you wish Eddie was here?”

“I-- of course I do, Stan, I fuckin’ invited him, I wanted my friends to come to my birthday party--”

“But would you feel like this if I couldn't come? If my mom told me I had to stay home, would you be like this?”

“Like what?” Richie asks, as if he doesn't know. He may not know what to call the hopelessly tangled knot in his stomach, but he knows that feeling.

Stan just keeps looking at him, the comic book open in his lap. His eyes are curious, but not angry or betrayed or disgusted (not yet, some small voice at the back of Richie's mind supplies.) Stan is smart. Maybe he could help him untangle all of this, put it in words and a story he can tell.

“I just... I feel shitty. I wanted my friends to be here. Both of them.”

Stan nods and puts the comic book away while Richie stares down at the floor, like there are answers down in the terrible basement carpet. He moves closer to Richie, his focus on the movie now. “I think they might be vampires, actually.”

Richie swipes at his eyes quickly. “What makes you say that?”

“Because they keep looking for crosses. Those don't do anything to zombies.”

“They would if you hit em hard enough.”

Stan laughs, and Richie smiles despite himself. As the movie wears on, he takes off his glasses and leans his head against Stan's shoulder, resting

there in his steady, calm presence.



Richie lets himself into the coffee shop that Wednesday, humming to himself. He's had that Belinda Carlisle song stuck in his head all week, and honestly, he doesn't mind. It's a good song, and fuck anyone who says otherwise.

"Tozier. We need to talk."

Richie's entire body flails, and he drops his keys on the floor. "Jesus, Brian, you about gave me a fuckin' heart attack--"

"Step into the back, would you," his manager says, gesturing to the kitchen. It isn't a request.

Richie nods, glancing over his shoulder nervously. He picks up his keys and follows him, eyes fixed on the only exit, the door out to the dumpster. "What's up, boss man?" he says, trying to sound casual, as if his heart isn't pounding a mile a minute, as if his brain isn't screaming for him to run.

"Give me your keys."

"What, you changing the locks on me?" Richie tries to joke, but it hangs limp and heavy in the air. Was it always so suffocatingly hot in this kitchen?

"Don't make this harder than it needs to be, Tozier."

"You kick me out and now you're firing me?"

"What did you think would happen? I mean, you close the shop when you're not supposed to, you don't do half the shit you need to do when you're here--"

"You told me to close up early if it's slow! You told me that!"

"To save money. Not so you could have... guests." His lip curls as he says it, the same way you might say vermin, or other uglier words,

the ones that followed Richie through the halls and down a flight of stairs and into the screaming dark.

Richie's jaw clenches in a hard, defensive line, as if he expects a blow. He says nothing, staring just over Brian's head at the exit door.

"You're lucky I don't press charges for all the shit you've taken, honestly."

"I fucking told you that day shift was stealing from you! You didn't listen! I haven't taken shit from you!"

"Tozier, give me the keys."

For a moment, an unexpected wave of rage overpowers the fear, and in that moment when the wave breaks, Richie has one of his few brilliant ideas.

He unhooks the shop keys from the rest of the ring and tosses them over Brian's head, where they land in the garbage can, a perfect shot, nothing but net.

When Brian goes to get them, Richie bolts, running out of the shop like his life depends on it. *Fast enough to beat the devil*, some kid whoops in the back of his mind.

By the time he's six blocks away, it occurs to him that he should have stolen something on the way out. "That would have shown the fucker," he says to himself, with a bitter laugh.

His entire body is twisted as tight and sharp as piano wire as he walks back home, and he wonders if his heart will ever beat normally again, if he'll always feel like this.

He doesn't remember what happened, not really. Not as a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Mostly it's a story other people told him in installments, tied up in his injuries.

He remembers a moment, suspended in the air just after they let him go, when there was nothing left but the fall, and it seemed like it would never come and he would live forever in that fractured moment, the last second that he was truly whole, too frozen to

scream or do anything at all but let it happen.

If hell is real, he thinks that maybe it'll be him, just about to fall, forever.



It's getting late, and Richie expects the clubhouse to be empty. He wants it to be empty. His head feels too heavy with things he can't say, with things he can't stop seeing and hearing. He wants to be hidden and alone, where no one can find him to hurt him.

He climbs into the hammock and curls onto his side, tucking his knees up to his chest. The rocking of the hammock in the cool underground air feels as close to safe as anything does these days, and he finally lets himself cry, the kind of full-body sobs he can only muffle into his pillow in the deadest part of the night. He cries for Eddie's broken arm and the missing posters all over town and Bill's little brother and the tokens he left behind at the Capitol arcade and this whole fucking graveyard of a town.

"Hello?"

"Shit," Richie mutters, swiping frantically at his eyes and knocking his glasses askew. "Who's there?"

"It's Mike," the other boy says, carefully coming down the ladder. "You okay?"

"Yeah, no, I'm fucking peachy," Richie says as he sits up, too tired to sound as prickly as he feels. "What are you doing?"

"I wanted to see if Ben left his scrapbook here. Maybe there's something useful in there, you know?"

Richie shrugs. "Good luck finding anything in here." He turns into his side, watching Mike sift through the clutter on Ben's improvised workbench. There's a quietly thoughtful expression on his face as he methodically sorts through it, and Richie has a sudden, vivid mental picture of the inside of Mike's head as an enormous card catalog, everything organized in little drawers and meticulously cross referenced.

“Hey Mike?”

“Yeah?”

“Why Florida?”

He looks up from his work, momentarily confused. “Huh?”

“You said you wanna go to Florida. Why?”

“It seems nice. My grandpa has a guidebook, from when he went with my grandma. I always liked looking at the pictures. But I’d go anywhere. Anywhere they wouldn’t know me. Anywhere I could be someone else.”

Richie nods slowly, trying to imagine living in a place where he hasn’t been the Trashmouth since first grade, where no one knows him at all. It’s an impossible, intoxicating notion.

Maybe if no one knows them, they’ll be safe.

Maybe Mike says “Florida” when he means “the future.”

Maybe the future is a real place.



Richie is in the middle of disassembling his kitchen table when there’s a knock at the door. He stares around in confusion for a moment before getting to his feet and opening the door.

Eddie is standing on the steps, out of breath, worry blending into panic on his face. “Richie--”

“Hey, Eddie Spaghetti. C’mon in.”

Eddie is talking a mile a minute as he takes off his coat and drapes it over one of the kitchen chairs. “Richie, what the fuck? I went to the coffee shop and the guy said you don’t work there anymore? So then I thought maybe I got mixed up and went to the diner, but they said you were off today, and the Ugly Mug wouldn’t even let me in-- what happened to your table?”

"I'm fixing it. I got fired at the shop. He gave me a bunch of bullshit reasons, but the real reason... I mean, the real reason's bullshit too. It doesn't matter," he says with a soft huff of air as he settles back on the kitchen floor, with the wreckage of his table.

Eddie only looks more concerned. "Rich, are you okay?"

Richie lifts his shoulder in a half shrug without meeting the other boy's eyes.

"Richie."

"I'll be okay."

"But what about right now?" Eddie's voice is quiet, but so urgent.

Richie stops, screwdriver in hand, then slowly shakes his head. Eddie reaches out and gently takes it away, covering Richie's hand with both of his. "Can you sit with me? Just for a little bit, okay, Rich?"

It takes a moment, but Richie nods and lets Eddie lead him over to the couch, guide him to sit beside him, and take his hand. He slumps down enough to rest his head against Eddie's shoulder, breathing in as deep as he can.

"What happened, Richie?"

"Nothing."

"Richie..."

"No, I'm serious. That's the stupid part. All he did was ask me for my keys and tell me to fuck off." Richie sighs, taking off his glasses and closing his eyes. "But it's like... part of me thought it was happening all over again, like in high school. That it was happening again, and this time, I might not make it. And now... I'm stuck. And I can't stop thinking about it."

Eddie squeezes his hand and leans his head against Richie's. "I'm so sorry, Rich."

"It's not your fault. I'm the one with the fucked up brain. It... it'll go

away eventually. You can go back to your dorm if you want. Don't think I'm gonna be much fun tonight, sorry."

"I'm not going anywhere," Eddie says, squeezing his hand again. "Can I show you something?"

Richie nods slowly, letting his eyes drift closed for a moment. He can hear Eddie rummaging through his backpack, but he doesn't open his eyes until the other boy presses a thick envelope into his hand.

"What are these," he mumbles as he puts his glasses back on.

"I got my photos back from the weekend. I just... I thought you might want to see them."

"You trying to blackmail me, Eds? Pay you a hundred bucks and this picture of me looking like a dipshit disappears, that kind of thing?"

Eddie elbows him lightly. "Just look at them, Rich, Jesus," he says, more amused than annoyed. He winds his arms around Richie's shoulders, a firm and reassuring weight there.

The first picture is of Eddie's dorm room, freshly unpacked and filled with late summer sunlight. He shuffles that one to the bottom and goes past the photo of the arcade to the one of him looking like a blurry ghost in the snowy parking lot. "Pretty sure you could sell this one to the National Enquirer, Eds. Tell em you saw Bigfoot in a strip mall parking lot."

Eddie sticks his tongue out at him, and in that expression, Richie can so perfectly see *the eleven year old boy making faces at him from the bus window as it pulled away, cracking himself up with the sheer joy of it.*

The next picture knocks the breath out of his lungs. It's him in the picture, he knows that. But he doesn't... look like that. Not in real life. The boy in the picture is caught in perfect light, leaning casually against the window frame, a half smile on his lips like he's remembering a good dream as he looks out onto the dark street.

This Richie could be at peace, could even be happy.

"Holy shit, Eds, is that actually me? Or did you swap me out for like,

a hotter body double--”

“Yeah, it's you,” Eddie laughs, pressing a kiss to Richie's cheek. “I saw you there, and I wanted... I wanted to remember that. And I wanted you to see it. The way I did.”

Richie takes hold of Eddie's hand and carefully knits their fingers together, holding on as he tries to imagine being a part of the kind of moment someone wants to keep forever.

Notes for the Chapter:

as an apology for the excessive lateness of this chapter, please have these out of context things i said about Eddie while bothering a dear friend

"he keeps his money in a smaller third fanny pack inside his second fanny pack

an infinite matroyshka doll of fanny packs

once he unpacks the final, innermost fanny pack, he will find the number of a highly qualified cognitive behavioral therapist"

9. Chapter 9

Notes for the Chapter:

suggested listening for this chapter: "about today" by the national.

also, a heads-up: this chapter deals really heavily with the death of Eddie's dad.

also also: thank you for all your kind comments, as always. you guys rule.

January blurs into February, and the world is a cold, flat gray that stretches on for miles. Eddie divides his time between Richie's apartment and the library-- it's too noisy to work in the diner, even if Richie would be happy to let him sit in a booth by the counter with one cup of coffee all night. And he has so much to do.

It's easy to burrow into his work when the world is cold and harsh like this. That may be the only good thing about February.

Eddie's never liked the month, and he can't really remember why. There's a lot of explanations that sound almost right-- the cold, Valentine's Day, the endless snow-- but none of them slide into place like the last piece of the puzzle. None of them ring true, but that's never seemed like a problem. Not until now.

He's running back from his late class in another nighttime flurry, feeling the chill soaking down into his bones. In weather like this, the smokers stick closer to the building, and the smell of their cigarettes hits him in waves.

His chest grows tighter at the smell, and out of habit, he goes to his pocket, digging for the plastic inhaler that isn't there, hasn't been there since he left his mother's house.

You should have brought it with you, you know how you get, Eddie bear, you know you need it--

He shoves that thought away and focuses on breathing in and out,

slow and regular, like everyone else does.

He makes it to his room in a fog, his body going through the basic motions of unlocking his door, dropping his bag on the floor while his mind is hundreds of miles away, in another time and place.



Frank Kaspbrak smokes two cigarettes a day. Never in the house, never even on the porch. He's not supposed to do that where Eddie can see it or breathe it in. "It's bad for you, bud. Don't ever take this up," he always says, vanishing the battered lighter like a magic trick. He shakes his finger at Eddie like he's scolding him, but there's always a little bit of a smile in his eyes when he does it, like they're sharing a private joke.

He used to be a pack a day smoker, back when he met Sonia. He cut back for her, and gave it up as much as he could for Eddie. She tells the story over and over, and Eddie listens with a mixture of wonder and bewilderment, trying to imagine his parents before he existed. It doesn't work even when he sees the evidence himself in their photo albums-- his mother in a long plaid skirt and a white sweater, no glasses, hair teased up impossibly high, smiling shyly at the camera, caught midwave; his father sitting on the hood of some great red boat of a car, a proud smile on his face.

He smokes out in the little detached garage, in the workshop Sonia insists on calling an office. Eddie doesn't understand why. In his experiences, an office is where you go and wait for something to happen. Workshops are where you make things happen.

That's what his dad does. He makes things. He takes old junk that other people have left on the curb and cleans it up, makes them new again, makes them shine. Eddie could watch for hours. He does watch for hours, sitting on a stool beside his father, watching scars and dents vanish under sandpaper and paint.

As he gets a little older, his father places the tools in his hands and guides him through the motions. "You're good at this, kiddo. You got potential."

Eddie looks up at him with wide eyes, and in that moment, he really

believes that he can take the broken parts of the world and make them better and brighter.

The smell of cigarettes clings to Frank Kaspbrak better than any cologne, and when Eddie breathes it in, he feels safe, like the things that whisper from the back of his mind can't really get him, and strong, like he can do anything at all.



It makes sense for Eddie not to remember his father. He was so young when he died, after all. He only really remembers the pictures on the mantle, the obituary his mother covered in tape and clipped inside the front cover of her Bible.

Frank Joseph Kaspbrak (1939-1982) passed away at Derry Hospital after a long illness. He is survived by his wife, Sonia, and his son, Edward.

It would make sense for him not to remember. Wouldn't he want to forget things like this? Wouldn't anyone?

Eddie sinks down to his bed, hands in his hair. It's coming back too fast now, and he feels like he's drowning in it, crushed in the kind of grief you can spend your whole life running from.



They are trying to hide it from him, but Eddie is not a stupid boy. He knows his dad is sick. Not the kind of sick where you lay up in your bed or in front of the TV for a couple of days, but a different kind of sick. The kind that wraps around you like the big snakes on the nature programs, squeezing you tight until you're small and broken enough to swallow whole.

His mom shoos him away from their bedroom door. "Dad needs his rest now, Eddie. He can play with you later, once he feels better."

But better doesn't come, and Eddie can hear her crying through the vent in the living room.

The dread settles in his stomach like a lead ball, so heavy that he staggers a little when he gets up. He runs out the side door through the cold November air to the one place that he feels safe.

The workshop still smells like sawdust and paint and cigarette smoke, and as he breathes in deep and greedy breaths of that comforting smell, he believes that everything will be okay. This sickness will break like any other fever, and his dad will come down the steps with a cigarette tucked behind his dad and say, "hey kiddo, wanna go treasure hunting?"

"Your mom's gonna flip her lid if she catches you out here without a coat on, Eddie."

Eddie jumps to his feet, running towards his dad and flinging his arms around his waist. For a second, he almost believes that his wish came true, like in a fairy tale, and that everything will be the way it was. But his father smells like hospital antiseptic and the hot still air in their bedroom, barely a trace of cigarettes. "Dad! Dad, do you feel better?"

"I'm catching my second wind. You wanna help me with a project?"

Eddie nods eagerly, already clambering over to the bright red rolling toolbox. His father laughs and shakes his head. "No, you go get your bike. I'll handle this."

When Eddie wheels his bike over, his father has a wrench in his hand. "C'mere, watch. You can do the other side, if you pay attention."

Eddie watches intently, memorizing every motion of his dad's work worn hands. He struggles with removing the wheel on the other side, but his dad murmurs encouragement and guides him. "Good job, kiddo."

Eddie grins up at him. "Are you gonna show me how to ride?"

His dad shakes his head, something a little sad in the gesture even as he smiles. "Not today, Eddie. It'll be dark soon." He leans against the workbench and pulls a single cigarette out of a packet in his toolbox. He calls Eddie over and lights it up, before resting a hand on his shoulder. "I want to talk to you about something, Eddie."

That ball of dread drops into his stomach, ice cold and too heavy to bear. "Dad?"

"You know I've been... pretty sick lately."

Eddie nods solemnly, watching the glow of the cigarette as it burns down.

"Tomorrow I'm going into the hospital. So they can help me get better. It might be a long time. But I'm coming back to you, kiddo. I promise."

Eddie throws his arms around his dad again, as if he can hold him tightly enough to stop all of this from happening, keep them safe in the workshop and fix the world.

"Hey, hey, Eddie, you don't have to cry. You can, but you don't have to. I made you a promise. I'm gonna keep it."



But he doesn't. The days bleed out into weeks and months, and his father stays gone. His mother never has any answers for him, and when he sees how red her eyes are, he stops asking. Instead, he climbs up on the couch next to her and leans against her, both of them staring at the TV without really watching.

He told his friends at school that his father was sick, and Stan and Richie came back the next day with a get well card they'd made themselves on construction paper, Stan's neat print and Richie's scribbly drawings. He's supposed to give it to his dad. But he hasn't been able to see him, and he keeps opening it up to look at the drawing on the inside. It's a before and after picture of a man with his body in a full cast like in a cartoon, frowning and crying, then the same man, smiling and well, lifting a car over his head.

He makes a wish on that drawing over and over again-- please let him come home.

It's the week before Valentine's Day when his teacher comes up to him during silent reading and whispers that his mother is picking him up. He gathers his backpack and looks over at Stan in the back of the classroom, serenely wrapped up in the chapter book he's picked out out, so engrossed he doesn't even notice Eddie leaving.

Richie lifts his head up from where it's propped lazily on his hand, smiling at Eddie and waving goodbye. He flashes Eddie a quick thumbs up for good measure, even though he gets scolded by the teacher for it.

His mother is waiting in the car, her expression unreadable behind her thick glasses. They drive past home, past the doctor's office, past the park and the library.

When they pull into the parking lot of the hospital, Eddie's heart leaps up into his chest. They're here to pick up dad, and he'll come home, and everything will be like it was.

Everything will be fine.

His chest gets tight at the cold, antiseptic smell of the hospital, but he keeps on walking up to the elevator, gripping his mother's hand as tight as he can.

There's a new smell as they leave the elevator, one that Eddie doesn't know how to describe. It screams of still air and empty halls and white lights and sickness, the kind that doesn't break.

His mother stops him just outside the nurse's station, crouching down to be eye level with him. Her voice is low and urgent as she tells him, "Eddie, you know your dad's been very sick. He might look... different than you remember. But he wants to see you. It's really important that you see him, Eddie bear. Okay?"

Eddie remembers a story Richie told him and Stan once, about a man who saw a ghost and all his hair turned white. Is that what she means? He can handle that. That's nothing. "Okay, Mom."

She pulls him into a hug, and she smells like the hospital too.

The room is small, and the sickness smell is almost overpowering, and the person in the hospital bed has their head turned away, looking out towards the window. Eddie's stomach churns and squirms, and he turns slightly to look at his mother, uncertain. Are they in the right place?

"Frank? Frank, are you awake? Eddie's here."

The man in the bed turns towards them, and Eddie freezes in place in the

middle of the doorway. This man is cadaverously thin, skin a dry pale yellow-brown, flyaway wisps of dark hair scattered over his scalp, a raw, red wound where a nose used to be, and worst of all, Frank Kaspbrak's warm brown eyes, gone cloudy and far away, staring out of this face. "Eddie," he says, his voice worn low and ragged. "It's good to see you, kiddo. C'mere."

Eddie can't speak, only shake his head. This isn't his dad. This can't be his dad. They're supposed to bring dad home today. Everything is supposed to go back to normal now.

His mother's voice is sharp. "Eddie, go to Dad."

He shakes his head, staring straight ahead, wanting to look anywhere else but unable to.

"Sonia, it's okay--"

"It isn't! It isn't okay, Frank!" Her hand goes to Eddie's shoulder, and she starts to steer him towards the bed. That's when Eddie breaks away and runs out the door, as fast as he possibly can.

He runs until he finds a dead end and sinks down onto the cold linoleum, hugging his knees up to his chest. He can't stop seeing his father's eyes in that terrible face, no matter how tightly he closes his eyes.

Someone is hauling him up to his feet by his shoulders, almost shaking him before dragging him back down the hall. When he opens his eyes, his mother is staring at him, face red, tears tracking down his cheeks. "Eddie, you need to go back in there and talk to Dad."

He shakes his head, jaw clenched shut in quiet terror.

"Eddie, this-- this could be your last chance! Do you understand that? Do you understand that this could be the last time you see your dad?"

He stares up at her, eyes wide and uncomprehending. His breath catches in his chest for a moment. This is his dad. There's not supposed to be a last time.

"You need to go in there. Eddie, I promise you--"

Eddie grits his teeth and shakes his head again, this time resolute and not just terrified. He's had enough of promises.

They stand in silence in the hallway for a few minutes, both breathing like they've just run a marathon. Then his mother retreats back into the hospital room without a word.

This is the first fight he ever wins against his mother.

It will be the only one he regrets.



After the funeral, Eddie can't sleep. He's so exhausted that he can barely keep his eyes open, but his brain won't quiet. It's full of hymns and funeral flowers and that big portrait of his dad propped up on the coffin and grinning at him like a familiar stranger.

It's too much.

He gets out of bed and pulls his winter coat on over his pajamas, then creeps down the stairs and out the side door to the workshop.

It's dark in there, and it's cold in a way that it's never felt before, like it's somewhere uninhabited, long abandoned. But Eddie goes to the top drawer of the toolbox and pulls out a single cigarette, one of the last two in the packet. He holds it between his fingers for a moment before breathing in that smell. It's warm and comforting, and in that moment, he can believe that this whole winter has been a bad dream they'll all wake up from.



Someone is knocking on Eddie's door. He sits up, wiping at his face. There shouldn't be a floor meeting, not this late, and he's not expecting anyone. He opens the door, taking a deep breath to steady his voice.

"Pizza delivery," Richie says in a preposterous New Jersey accent, brandishing a small pizza box.

Eddie frowns, leaning against the doorframe. "I didn't order a pizza," he murmurs absently.

"I mean, I know you didn't. And I'm many things, Eds, but a pizza guy ain't one of them. It was a surprise," Richie says, leaning in close. "Can I come in?"

Eddie nods and waves him in. He still feels foggy and out of his depth, but he tries to be present for Richie, even though he feels like he's clinging to the present by his fingernails. "Why are you surprising me?"

Richie answers with his best attempt at a casual shrug. Eddie just stares at him until he relents, running a hand through his shaggy hair with a sheepish, almost shy grin. "Cause... I have to work on Valentine's Day, so I thought, hey, maybe I'll surprise him tonight?"

"Thanks, Richie," Eddie says, smiling at the other boy.

"You didn't even open it."

"I... I'm not hungry right now."

Richie sets the pizza down on the desk and flops onto the bed, but he looks over at Eddie, confusion and concern creeping into his expression. "Eddie, you okay?"

Eddie looks up from the papers he's organizing on his desk, caught up in the crossfire between the urge to lie and the urge to unburden himself. Finally, he shakes his head.

"Eds, what's wrong?"

Eddie drifts over to the bed, sitting beside Richie on the small, lumpy dorm mattress. "I remembered some stuff. About... about my dad. Stuff I didn't know was even there to forget."

Richie wraps an arm around Eddie's shoulders, a warm and comforting presence. He stays quiet, like he's not sure what to say,

but he stays there, as close to Eddie as he can get.

“And it's-- it's not even the stuff about when he got sick that's the worst. It's-- I didn't remember what he was like before that, what we were like. I didn't remember him at all, like he didn't even matter...”

Tears sting at his eyes, and he doesn't even fight them, just lays down on top of Richie and lets them fall, closing his eyes and resting his head on Richie's chest. He's crying and snotting all over Richie's t-shirt, and he can't even bring himself to care.

But the other boy stays there, quietly rubbing a hand along his back. “Do... do you wanna tell me about him?”

Eddie lifts his head, confused. “What?”

“Tell me about your dad.”

“We... we used to build stuff. Or rebuild stuff, I guess would be the better word. Old junk people would leave out for the trash, but he saw... something better in it. He could really make things shine.”

“He sounds great,” Richie says quietly, pressing a kiss to the top of Eddie's head.

“He was,” Eddie replies, closing his eyes again and listening to the steady sound of Richie's heartbeat.

They lie there for a while in the quiet, letting it cover them like a blanket. Richie doesn't know what to say, but he stayed. Maybe that's enough. Maybe it's more than enough.

Eddie is half convinced that Richie has fallen asleep when the other boy speaks up again. “Hey, can I show you your surprise, Eds?”

Eddie nods and sits up so Richie can climb out of bed and grab the pizza box. He's almost shy again as he offers it to Eddie. “Here. It's... it's the best I could do, honestly,” he says, red creeping up his neck and into his cheeks.

Eddie opens the lid and can't help but laugh. The pepperoni on the pizza is arranged in a clumsy, crooked heart. “How did you...”

"I called in a favor with somebody I know at the pizza joint down the block-- it's corny, right? It's corny."

"It's more cheesy, honestly," Eddie says, barely managing to keep a straight face as he takes a bite.

Richie lets out a long, disgusted sigh, even with a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Right, well, I'm leaving now--"

"Aw, come on, Rich," Eddie laughs, holding out a hand. And just like that, Richie is back, stealing a slice of pizza for himself.

"Only if you promise not to drop anymore heinous puns-- don't, I can see the gears turning in your head, Eddie Spaghetti, don't test me."

Eddie smiles up at him and pulls him into a kiss, long and lingering and sweet. "Thanks, Rich."

"It's just a pizza, Eds, no big deal--" "You know what I mean."

Richie takes his hand and strokes his thumb over the back of it in gentle circles. "Wouldn't wanna be anywhere else," he says softly, pressing a kiss to Eddie's cheek.

Eddie closes his eyes and squeezes Richie's hand, trying to act like his heart didn't skip a beat in his chest at that idea.



Eddie comes back to school after the funeral, and Valentine's Day is long past. The little Valentine mailbox is still sitting on his desk, completely undecorated since he'd been gone so long. There's just his name written on the side in an adult's neat handwriting.

But the box is full to bursting.

Eddie frowns and begins carefully removing each of the little folded pieces of paper.

They're all handmade, with little drawings by Richie, messages by Stan, messy collaborations. Eddie thinks they must have used up all the scrap

paper in the school, and maybe even all of Stan's box of 120 crayons. All to fill his little mailbox with robots and dragons and crocodiles and turtles and aliens and whales and whatever else popped into their brains.

For the first time in what feels like ages, Eddie Kaspbrak smiles.

Notes for the Chapter:

sorry.

10. Chapter 10

Notes for the Chapter:

suggested listening for this chapter: "heaven is a place on earth" by Belinda Carlisle.

surprise double update, what's up?

also, uh. note the rating change.

also also: i changed the title to a lyric from "the silence" that described the fic a little better and also because i just like confusing people, i guess?

Lou is a regular at the diner. She stops in after she finishes her delivery shift at the pizza place and has a cup of coffee or two and shoots the shit with Richie for a while, usually about movies-- he's convinced she's seen every movie that exists, and she's done nothing to disabuse him of the notion.

Tonight is a way slower night than usual, and it's just the two of them at the diner, talking and laughing as Richie cleans up the kitchen.

She's the one he called in that Valentine's Day favor with. It was such a small thing, he wouldn't expect her to remember it at all.

"Hey, what'd they think of your little surprise?"

Richie pauses for a second, trying to figure out how to answer this without blowing up most of his life. "Uh... it was great. Thanks, I owe you one, seriously, Lou--"

"I did something like that once for Chrissie. Got my friend at the bakery to ice a bunch of little hearts on a doughnut for her. It turns out she hates icing. But she still thought it was cute, so...." She says it all like it's no big deal, but she looks at Richie over her coffee cup, something meaningful in her expression, like they've been circling each other for a long time and have finally managed to meet. Like she recognized him.

Richie swallows hard, trying to convince the panicked voice at the back of his head that it'll be okay, just this once. Especially if she told first. "I-- yeah. He really liked it. I mean, he told me it was cheesy, but I mean... it's Valentine's Day. Kinda comes with the territory, you know?"

The tension in the air drains away, and Lou smiles at him. "Yeah. Yeah, I agree. I didn't have that kind of excuse. So what's he like?"

"He's..." Richie's voice trails off, and he leans up against the counter for a moment, smiling to himself as he thinks about Eddie-- his bright smile, the sharp and stubborn line of his jaw, his wavy dark hair, his rambunctious laugh, his gentle brown eyes. "Eddie's great. He's really great." Those words are so inadequate for what he actually feels for Eddie, but he's not even sure how to describe what he feels. The only words he knows that sound even half right all sound like they were stolen out of some goofy ass pop song.

"We actually knew each other a long time ago, when we were kids. And then I ran into him down here. It was almost like... like we'd never left, you know?"

Lou nods, finishing her cup of coffee and setting it aside, smiling more to herself than Richie, like her thoughts have wandered to Chrissie. "I know the feeling. Good for you, man."

"Heading out?"

"Gotta get some sleep, you know?"

"No, I wouldn't know anything about that," Richie scoffs. "Have a good night, Lou."

"You too," she calls, just before the door clangs shut behind her. Richie stands for a moment in the empty diner, letting out a deep breath he didn't know he was holding.

So that's what it's like when people see you, that voice in the back of his head murmurs.



Richie has ten dollars burning a hole in his pocket, and the Capitol is showing The Return of Swamp Thing, a movie he's urgently needed to see ever since the poster showed up in the coming attractions.

And naturally, he has to round up his preferred movie-going companion. The dial tone rings for about a million years, and Richie scuffs his feet back and forth impatiently across the linoleum, too focused on that sound to wonder about that weirdo nervous flutter in his gut.

"Hello, Kaspbrak residence," Eddie says, sounding a little out of breath, like he just ran to the phone.

"Eddie Spaghetti!"

"Hey, Richie!" Is it possible to hear a smile in someone's voice? He'll have to file that question away for some other day.

"You wanna go to the movies? They've got a new one, about that swamp monster guy. It looks awesome--"

"I wish I could, but my mom and I are leaving to visit one of her friends. We're gonna be gone all day," Eddie says, and he sounds so disappointed. "Sorry, Richie."

"It's okay, Eds. Some other time."

In the background, he can hear Eddie's mother, hassling him to hurry up. "I gotta go. See you tomorrow?"

"Sure thing, Eddie Spaghetti." Richie sighs softly as he presses down on the cradle and goes to dial Stan's phone number. He hits a wall there too.

"I can't, Richie. I'm grounded."

"What? What the fuck do you mean, you're grounded? Did they catch you sneaking out to look at birds again?"

Stan's sigh is a rush of static on the phone. "It's a long story. I have to go, I'll get in more trouble if they catch me on the phone. Bye, Richie."

Bill doesn't answer the phone at all. Richie kicks at the kitchen linoleum for a moment in frustration. He can't be out of people already, can he?

He opens the phone book and flips to the Hs, scanning for "Hanscom" or "Hanlon." He's pretty sure that's Ben's last name-- better that than "Hanson," since he'd rather not call ten different numbers trying to find one kid he's met twice. "Hanlon" doesn't even show up in the phone book, no matter how many times he checks.

At the second number, he hits paydirt. "Hi, this is Ben."

Richie drops into a deep, gruff mobster voice, like one he's heard in TV movies. "Benny boy. Gotta proposition for ya."

Ben's voice is confused and a little wary. "Um, who's this?"

Richie sighs and rubs at his temples. He has one talent, and it's wasted here in Derry. His voice is normal when he speaks up again. "It's Richie, Ben."

"Oh, hey, Richie. What's up?"

"Absolutely nothing. Hey, wanna come to the movies with me? They're showing The Return of Swamp Thing, it looks fuckin' awesome, swamp monsters for days. You in?"

Ben's voice is a little sad. "I wish, but I don't have any money."

Richie is possessed by an uncharacteristic spirit of generosity. Maybe he's growing up. Maybe he's just that determined not to sit there in the theater alone. "Hey, don't sweat it, Ben. My treat, okay?"

"Really? That's great, Richie, I owe you one--"

"Meet me down at the Capitol, okay? It's on Main Street, you can't miss it."

He hangs up the phone and breezes out the door to his bike. It's baking hot outside, and he's sweated half to death by the time that he makes it downtown. At least Eddie's not here, he thinks for a moment, wiping the sweat off his forehead. Another one of those real puzzler thoughts. Sometimes he wishes he could steal the answer key to his own brain, just

to try and figure this shit out.

Beverly Marsh is leaning up against the alley wall just before the Capitol, holding a cigarette between her fingers. She's not really hiding, just staking out one of the only shady spots on the street now. As he watches, she starts to blow smoke rings. Not as a party trick, or to impress anyone, but just because she can.

"Can you do balloon animals next?"

She flips him off, but she laughs a little while she does, before taking another drag of her cigarette. "You first, Richie. Where's the rest of your club?"

Richie shrugs. "They all ditched me, if you can believe that. Eddie's got a hot date in Bangor, Stan got grounded, Bill... I don't even fuckin' know where he is. Joined the circus, maybe, or just forgot how a phone works."

"Sad day for you," she says, stubbing out her cigarette on the alley wall, right on the hideous mural. She actually might be as cool as Eddie thinks she is, Richie realizes with a mixture of admiration and dismay.

"I know, right? Luckily, my boy Benny came through for me in my hour of need. We're gonna go see Swamp Thing."

"Sounds fun."

"You wanna come?"

She lifts a shoulder in a shrug. "Sure. But I've got about 25 cents to my name."

"I can get your ticket, if you want. I've got money."

The offer surprises both of them, and Beverly meets it with a raised eyebrow. "You asking me on a date, Richie?"

He can feel his stupid, traitorous face going red. The whole idea of a date is so... embarrassing, so stupid. And there's a faint, sad ache, somewhere in the middle of his chest, stinging ever so slightly, as if some part of him longs to be seen. "You wish, Beverly," he scoffs.

She puts a hand on her heart, tilting her head and making her eyes all gooey and lovestruck. "Oh, but I do, Richie! I make a wish every night-- 'please, god, let Richie Tozier take me to the dollar matinee to see the other swamp monsters..."

Richie offers her his arm with a low bow, now trying out a new, southern gentleman voice. "How could I deny a little lady like you her dearest wish?"

"You're a real gentleman, Richie. Hey, new kid."

Ben Hanscom is standing there with his bike, just staring at the two of them. "Hi guys," he says softly.

"Good news, Ben-- Bev's coming with us."

His face lights up, and Richie thinks that a good Ben Hanscom smile could really give even the brightest summer sunshine a run for its money. It's a good look on him. "Really? That's great!"

"All thanks to Richie," Beverly says. She smiles back at Ben, and Richie feels like he's been caught in some kind of weird crossfire.

He offers Ben his other arm. "Let's go, c'mon. All the good seats are gonna be taken." Ben steps up right away, hooking his arm in Richie's without a moment of hesitation.

They have to untangle themselves for a moment so Richie can pay for their tickets and then their popcorn, but other than that, they move as a single, cohesive unit towards one of the two screens. The Capitol is one of those old fashioned movie palaces, with soaring ceilings, lush red curtains framing the screen, and an honest to God balcony. It's starting to fade and molder along the edges, but Richie still loves it with all his heart.

He leads them up to the balcony, patting the seats on either side of him. "C'mon, don't be shy. Here, Bev, pass me the popcorn."

Ben and Beverly have settled in on either side of him, and Richie feels strangely content. He isn't spending the afternoon alone, like he was so afraid of-- he had been afraid of that, he's startled to realize. He was relieved when Ben answered the phone, and when Beverly took him up his invitation. He's never been particularly insightful when it comes to other

people, but he's almost sure that if he could look into either of their minds, he'd find that exact same sense of relief.

He wonders if any of them realized how lonely they were before they found each other.

The movie is... bad, a real dog turd of a picture, the kind of thing that not even Richie, a bonafide connoisseur of terrible movies, can defend, but that doesn't matter. They have their own fun, taking turns tossing popcorn into their mouths and catching it, or dubbing over Heather Locklear's terrible lines with their own equally terrible versions. At one point, they're all laughing so hard that tears are rolling down their faces, helplessly rocking back and forth in their seats. Richie's sides are aching with it, and he thinks, in one of the brief pauses between gales of laughter, that that particular kind of ache is the best feeling in the world.

When they step back out into the shimmering summer heat, Beverly lets out a contented sigh. "That was the best date ever, Richie."

He answers in the mobster voice, talking around an imaginary cigar. "Thanks, doll. Always happy to take you out on the town, show you a real good time." And then, on a classic, Tozier crazy impulse, he leans over and plants a kiss on her cheek.

She smells like cigarettes and popcorn, and she's so beautiful and tough, red gold hair in wild curls, blue-gray eyes like the ocean in the winter--Richie can see how somebody would fall in love with her. But he knows with a strangely comforting sense of certainty that he won't be that somebody.

"Gross, Richie," Beverly says, smiling as she lights up a cigarette.

Richie turns and sees Ben staring at the two of them, looking impossibly lonely, stranded a few feet behind them. "Aw, Benny my boy, don't be sad, I'm not gonna leave you hanging, c'mere." He steps over and kisses the other boy on the cheek.

Ben smells like popcorn too, and underneath that, the good, clean sweat of a summer day. He's all rounded edges and gentleness, and Richie thinks that anyone would be very lucky to fall for the guy. He is just as certain as with Beverly that it won't be him.

As he pulls away, he wonders what it would be like to kiss Eddie like this. That thought is like a lightning going off in his brain, illuminating months of stray thoughts and odd dreams Is... is that what he wants? Is he allowed to want that?

"I think the ticket taker looks pretty lonely if you're still in a kissing mood, Richie," Beverly says, grinning at him.

"Nah, it's all out of my system. Hey, you guys want some ice cream? I've still got some money, we could split something."

"You're pretty generous today."

"I have my moments," Richie says, throwing his head back as he offers an arm to each of them. "Onward and upward, losers."



A cold and miserable February turns into a cold and wet March, with no real sign of spring on the way. Eddie's classes are furiously busy now, and he spends the weekends at Richie's, taking advantage of the quiet to study. Richie isn't sure that quiet ever really applies to a space he's in, but he's happy for any excuse to be around Eddie, and maybe steal some time to kiss him and hold him.

The thing is... there's no good place for Eddie to work, so he ends up spreading photocopied journal articles, textbooks, notebooks, and other miscellanea that Richie can't even begin to identify all across the floor, letting his body bunch up and twist like a pretzel to keep going back and forth between all this shit..

Richie's been working on a solution. He found a couple card tables somewhere in the landlord's junk, and he went ahead and swiped those, which is a start, at least. And today, he spotted an enormous, old-fashioned wooden office chair in the window of the secondhand store. Its finish is beat to shit, and it squeaks, but it's perfect. Richie snaps it up immediately. He's only a couple blocks from home, and the thing has wheels. It should be a breeze to get home.

Half a block later, his back feels like it's going to freeze in the shape of a C forever, and it's starting to rain. "Goddammit," he mutters,

already resigning himself to a very wet trip home.

“Need a ride?”

He turns to see Lou in her beat up truck, her window rolled down to talk to him. “Nah, I'm good.”

“You sure?”

His jeans are already soaked, and the rain is only getting harder. It'll be a short trip, right? “Actually, that'd be great. Can I toss this in the back?”

“Go for it.”

Richie shivers a little, even in the blasting heat of the truck. “Thanks, Lou. It's at Third and Clay, I live over the garage. Look for the yard full of junked out cars, you can't miss it.”

The ride is quiet, and Lou turns up the music, humming to herself and drumming on the steering wheel.

“So, uh, how's Chrissie?”

“She's good, last I heard. It's midterms, so we haven't seen each other too much. My soc class is trying to kill me, I swear. But spring break's coming up, and we're going away for that whole week. That'll make up for it.”

“Heading down to Cancún to party with the frat boys?”

Lou snorts. “Not a chance. No, Chrissie's uncle has a little fishing shack on the coast in North Carolina. She's driving us out there. Gonna spend the whole week there.”

“No shit? That's great, that sounds amazing.”

She smiles to herself. “That's what's getting me through this shitty couple of weeks: thinking about us on a beach. What about you? Got any plans for break?”

“I mean... I'm not a college kid, so it's not really a thing for me. I

don't know if Eddie's going home for it.”

“Did you ask?”

“That's my place right here,” Richie says, relieved to have a chance to dodge the question. Because no, he hasn't asked. He doesn't know what he's more worried about-- Eddie's answer, or the fact that he's really got nothing more to offer than a second run movie at the strip mall.

Lou helps him wrestle the chair up the narrow staircase and into his apartment. While Richie steers it over to the makeshift desk setup he has going, she looks around the apartment. “You know, you've sure got a lot of stuff for someone who talks as much as you do about pulling up stakes and going to Chicago.”

Richie freezes where he is, dripping rainwater on the rug. He wants to protest or make a joke, but he looks around the room and he realizes it's true. He keeps bringing home new shit for the apartment--extra blankets to drape over the couch, an actual dresser to put his clothes in instead of living out of laundry baskets, a fucking coat rack. He even put the first picture of Eddie wearing his glasses in a frame he found at the secondhand store and stuck it on the wall with the postcards.

It looks more like a home now, and not a temporary layover between point a and point b. When the fuck did that happen?

“I mean, I'm still gonna go someday. Doesn't mean I have to live out of a sleeping bag and a backpack until then.”

Lou nods, still looking around the tiny apartment. “It looks nice, Richie.”

He can feel his face getting red, and he ducks into the kitchen. “You want a cup of coffee or something?”

“Sounds good.”

He's happy to busy himself with that task, fussing around in the kitchen. As the coffee pot hums and gurgles, he remembers that little poster with glowing constellations on Eddie's wall. And then he has

an idea, something wild and absurd, a Richie Tozier classic.

“Hey, there's a lake around here, right?”

Lou gives him an amused look as she takes the first sip of her coffee. “Yeah, Richie, there's a big fuckin’ lake around here, maybe you've heard of it.”

“Yeah, but is it actually close? I can never tell with people around here, like, if it's under a ten hour drive, it's ‘not too far.’”

“It's like twenty minutes, Richie, depending on which beach you wanna go to. Why?”

“Follow up question-- are you driving to North Carolina?”

“Fuck no. Chrissie's taking us in her car. Why?”

“Can I borrow your truck while you're gone?”

“Why?”

Richie starts to shrug, then stops himself. He's pretty sure Lou is a friend-- like, an actual friend, someone he can trust at least a little, not just someone who laughs at his jokes. “I thought maybe I'd drive Eddie and me out to the beach. If he stays, I mean. I'll fill it up and everything.”

“Water my plants while I'm gone and we've got a deal.”

“You're a real champ, Lou.”

She grins at him and hands back the empty coffee mug. “You know it. Have a good one, Richie.”

“You too.”

The next time Richie goes in, he asks for Sunday and Monday of spring break off and is absolutely shocked when it's granted. He'll have to pick up more shifts at the Ugly Mug in the meantime, but that's fine. He can manage that, easy.

He waits nervously in his apartment for Eddie to roll in like he usually does, toting a heavy load of books. He's chopping up vegetables at the counter when he hears the door open, followed by the thud of a backpack against the floor and the rustle of a coat. "Hey, Eds. How's it going?"

Eddie lets out a sigh and sits down at the kitchen table, slumping over, hiding his head in his arms. "I'm gonna run away and live in the woods."

"That good, huh?"

"I have three papers due before the break, Richie. I gotta get two of them done this weekend, or I'm gonna collapse before Wednesday. What are you making?"

"Spaghetti. With sauce from scratch, because I'm fancy."

Eddie laughs, lifting his head up. "Spaghetti's not fancy."

"Way to shit on your namesake there, Eddie Spaghetti. I even looked up the recipe in a book, you should be proud of me. I'm basically a chef now."

"Yeah, you are. You should get one of those funny hats," he says, getting up from the table to slide his arms around Richie's waist and hold him for a moment.

Richie smiles, turning his head to look at Eddie. "Nah, I'm not a hat guy. I got a couple tables for you, and a real chair. So you don't have to work on the floor anymore. Wanna check it out?"

Eddie looks at him, eyes wide. "What?"

"Just go look, okay?"

The other boy reluctantly pulls away, wandering out of the kitchen. "Richie! You didn't have to do that!"

"Hey, if you're gonna hang out here, least I can do is give you an actual place to work--"

"It's enough that your place is actually quiet, seriously, Rich."

"See, I'm here, so I know that's not true."

Eddie smiles and leans in for a kiss, long and lingering, and god, Richie's missed this. Sure, he saw Eddie a couple days ago, but being around him, getting to touch him-- he misses him so much, when he's not around. *Fuck*.

"Yeah, but I can tune you out by now, I'm used to it."

"Thanks, Eds," he huffs, unable to contain the smile that follows after. "It's gonna be a while before this is ready."

"I'll get started, then." Eddie retreats to his tables, and Richie can hear him rummaging through his bag and setting up. He smiles to himself and goes back to the spaghetti sauce on the stove, turning on the volume on the radio.

He thinks this is shaping up to be a pretty good life, if he has the guts to chase it.

Once they've sat down to eat, Richie clears his throat. "Hey, Eddie, you got any plans for spring break?"

Eddie blinks rapidly, like he forgot spring break even existed as a concept. "Shit. That's coming up, isn't it?"

Richie grins at him, one eyebrow arched up. "Yeah, man. Two weeks. You're the one who's in school, I feel like you should know that."

"I've been busy. I... I don't, really. They're closing the dorms, so I guess I have to go back home"

Richie takes a deep breath, trying to will his heart to beat like a normal person's, or at least stay in his ribcage. "I mean, you don't *have* to. If you don't want to. It's not like my place is closing. And I have that weekend off, so we could do something. If you want to, I mean, it's no big deal--"

Eddie places a hand in his, tangling their fingers together. "Yeah, Rich. I wanna stay."

Richie can't speak, there's too much in his head, all the words smashed together in a massive pileup in his brain. So he leans over and kisses Eddie, hoping that that's enough.



Richie watches Beverly jump from the cliff, arms outstretched and fearless. "Aw, what the fuck?"

The boys stand there, watching breathless as she hits the water, goes under, and resurfaces. Richie stares around at all of them in turn, verifying that yes, they all just got shown up by Molly fuckin' Ringwald.

And then Ben goes over the cliff like a cannonball, his joyous whoop following him down to the water. Beverly gives him a high five when he joins her.

Bill follows without a word or a sound, other than the splash when he makes contact.

Then Stan goes up the edge, looking carefully down at the water. Richie can picture him scanning the area with his own version of Terminator vision, identifying obstacles and risks and doing the calculations in his head.

Then he steps back and takes a running leap, soaring off the cliff like one of those diving sea birds in his book. The other three are cheering him down below, and their laughter floats back up to Richie and Eddie.

And just like that, the Chickenshit Brigade is down to two. Richie edges up to the cliff, looking down at the others. They're yelling something he can't make out from this distance. "Come on, Eddie, let's go."

Eddie shakes his head, his jaw clenched. He's got that pinched look around his mouth, the one he gets when all the worries are piling up in his brain and about to overflow out his mouth in an endless stream of scary true stories. "I can't. This is crazy, Richie."

"It's fine! They're all fine!"

"We could literally die, Richie. If we land wrong, or get knocked out-- I'm

the only one of us who knows CPR! What are we gonna do if I get hurt?" He grabs his inhaler out of the pile of his clothes and takes a greedy gulp, even though it does nothing that Richie can see to calm his ragged breathing.

"We're not gonna get knocked out! We're gonna be fine, just like they were, like everyone else who's jumped off this thing!"

"But what if we aren't?"

Richie bites back a frustrated groan. He doesn't know how to argue with that endless string of what-ifs, and sometimes he's not sure that's even the right thing to do. "Stan did it, and he's too big of a pussy to go on the big slides at the fair! You really wanna get shown up by Molly Ringwald and Stan on the same day? Come on!"

Eddie shakes his head again, more vigorously this time. "Uh uh."

"What do you want me to do, Eds, hold your fuckin' hand?"

Eddie stares at him for a moment, then steps up to Richie's side, holding out his hand silently. Richie sighs softly. So that's what it's like when the universe calls your bluff.

He takes Eddie's hand awkwardly, a little stiffly. It feels... like a little too much, even for them, but he doesn't want to pull away. "Jesus Christ. Okay, on three--"

Eddie jumps before they can even get to two, and he's holding Richie's hand so tightly that he thinks it might break before they hit the water. They're both screaming at the top of their lungs, and Richie thinks in the half second before they break the surface that this might be the closest he ever gets to flying.



Richie gets the keys from Lou the night before spring break starts. The weather has finally started to warm up enough that spring feels like a promise the world can keep and not a lie they're telling themselves to feel better, and he's more and more confident that all of this is a good idea.

Sunday morning of the break dawns clear and bright, and Richie doesn't even need a jacket when he's outside making his preparations. Eddie is still asleep well into the afternoon, and Richie leaves him there to doze off. He's been working hard, after all. He could use the rest.

Richie takes an armload of his spare blankets and lays them out in the bed of the truck, stepping back for a moment to admire his work. "It's all coming together," he says to himself.

He proceeds to spend about an hour rearranging them, trying to get it exactly right, like an extremely normal and non-nervous person.

When he goes back inside, Eddie is sitting on the couch, paging through Richie's comic books while he eats some of the leftover pizza from the night before. He's wearing one of Richie's shirts. The thought makes Richie feel a little warm all over, and he ducks into the kitchen to grab some pizza for himself.

"I have some *Daredevils* on the shelf over there, if you want," he says casually as he settles on the couch beside him. Eddie just looks at him, head tilted curiously. "You really liked those, back when we were kids. I was going broke buying every issue I could find."

Eddie smiles, but there's no flicker of recognition as he flips through the pages of the *Daredevil* comic Richie hands him. There's always something a little painful about that, when their memories don't line up and reflect each other.

Once it gets closer to sunset, Richie clears his throat and nudges Eddie. "Hey, you wanna go somewhere?"

Eddie closes his book. "Sure. Where are we going?"

"Thought we'd go up to the lake, maybe? That could be cool."

"Sounds great. Lemme get dressed, okay?"

Richie nods, drumming his fingers nervously on his legs for a moment. He goes to the dresser himself, pulling out one of his favorite button ups, the one printed with palm leaves. He pulls it on over his plain black t-shirt and looks at his faint reflection in the

window. He looks good. Or at least, as good as he's gonna get.

He's still nervously smoothing the t-shirt out as Eddie turns around, dressed in a dark gray NYC sweatshirt, a white button up underneath. It's a little too big on him, but he looks adorable instead of disastrous, like Richie would. "You ready?"

Richie nods and leads the way down to the truck. He doesn't have butterflies in his stomach, he's got a full-fledged bird or something down there, flinging itself against his ribcage over and over, screaming that he's gonna fuck this up like he's done with everything else.

But Eddie smiles at him from the passenger seat, and suddenly that doesn't matter so much.



"You drive like an old man, Rich," Eddie says as Richie pulls the truck over beside the lake and begins the slow, painful process of backing it in, so that the bed faces the lake.

"I was being cautious! I thought you'd appreciate that."

"You drove like, 25 the whole way here."

"So?"

"The limit's 50 out here. We passed like, three signs."

"Everyone's a fuckin' critic," Richie says, rolling his eyes. He steps out and goes to the other side to open the door for Eddie. "After you."

They're on a little gravel pull out on the back roads, shaded by tall, old trees with their branches whispering faintly in the wind. The sun has almost completely set over the calm, apparently infinite. Out here, he could imagine that they're the only two people in the world, safe in their own little snowglobe of a moment.

He helps Eddie up into the bed of the truck and then climbs up himself, settling in beside the other boy. Without either of them

making a conscious effort, their hands end up entwined. Eddie huddles closer, leaning his head against Richie's shoulder. "What are we doing out here, Richie?"

Richie lies back against the blankets, urging Eddie down with him. "I thought you might wanna see some real stars for a change, instead of just the ones on your poster. And there's a lot less light pollution out here on this side of the water. You can finally go stargazing."

Eddie lies down beside him, still leaning his head against Richie's. Then he turns his head and kisses Richie, long and sweet, and Richie feels the smile there singing out through every cell in his body. He's grinning himself as he pulls away, pointing at the sky. "You gotta tell me what all this shit is, though. I just know these are stars, and that's all I've got."

Eddie looks up at the sky thoughtfully, humming to himself. Then he traces out a curved shape in the sky, something that looks a little like a wing. "You see that? That's Velas."

Richie tries, but all he can see is a random scatter of lights an impossible distance away until Eddie takes his hand and helps him trace that shape in the sky, star to star. "What's that?"

"It means 'the sails.' It's supposed to be part of the ship Jason and the Argonauts sailed."

Something flickers in Richie's memory without ever catching-- some movie they watched in his basement when they were supposed to be working on a diorama for social studies. "Those were the guys who had to find the golden sheep, right?"

Eddie laughs. "Golden fleece, Richie."

"Whatever, same difference."

Now Eddie is using both their hands to trace what looks like an upside down Y. This one's fainter, but Richie can see it. "So what's that one?"

"That's Cancer, the crab."

“Doesn't look like any crab I've ever seen.”

“The story is, I think, that Hera sent a big crab to stop Hercules, and he kicked it all the way up there. Maybe, I'm not sure.”

“Still doesn't look like a crab.”

Eddie moves on, tracing a simple line and two dots. “That's Canis Minor. I don't remember the story, but it means ‘little dog.’”

“Had any of these people ever *seen* an animal?”

“Richie!”

“I'm serious, I think the Greeks were fuckin' drunk.”

“Stop it,” Eddie says, turning to kiss Richie again. They're both laughing into the kiss, and they don't pull away, not really. It's full dark now, and Eddie opens his mouth into the kiss, and Richie feels a little drunk himself on the taste of him. He barely manages to hold back a groan as Eddie pulls away to futz around with the blankets. “What are you doing, Eds?”

“I'm cold.” But even under the faint moonlight, Richie can see the flush of red on his cheeks, and the way he bites his lip when he pulls the top blanket back for both of them. There's nowhere else he can think of to be, not a single place in the world he'd rather be.

He's leaning over Eddie, one hand in the other boy's hair, the other on his hip. The fabric of Eddie's shirt shifts, and suddenly, he's touching bare, warm skin, and Richie-- Richie feels fucking feverish with how much he wants Eddie, like he can catch fire from it. He pulls his mouth away from Eddie's and starts trailing kisses down his jawline, his throat. Eddie lets out a soft, pleased moan, and that sound echoes down to the very core of Richie's brain, setting off another wildfire of want. He wants to hear that sound more, louder, forever.

Before the last rational scrap of his brain can even come up with a counter argument such as *this is crazy, this is stupid, you're literally outside, Richard*, he moves his hand to the front of Eddie's jeans, tracing between the seam and the button. “Eds, baby, can I...”

Eddie nods frantically, biting his lip, his beautiful brown eyes so fucking wide, and it almost knocks Richie off balance again to realize that Eddie feels the same way, burning up for him.

He leans back down and kisses Eddie again as he undoes the button of his jeans and slips a hand inside. He feels the smooth elastic band of Eddie's boxers, the soft fabric, the tantalizing hardness of Eddie underneath. He runs his palm along the outline of Eddie's cock, his mouth still on Eddie's, until Eddie rocks his hips up impatiently, desperately. "Richie, please..."

The tip of Eddie's cock is poking out of the band of his boxers now, and Richie can feel it slick with precum. He pulls the boxers down and wraps his fingers around Eddie, enthralled with the velvety weight of it. His rhythm is clumsy and imperfect, and he worries that he's doing something wrong, but Eddie moans his name, knots his fingers into Richie's curly hair, and whispers "don't stop."

"You like that?" Richie says, almost breathless himself. Eddie nods helplessly, pulling Richie into another kiss, desperate and messy. He gasps into the kiss and rocks his hips up, and Richie pulls his hand away, absently wiping it on the furthest corner of the blanket. He's too busy doing his best to commit the sight of Eddie, mouth half open, eyes heavy lidded, face flushed, looking so fucking beautiful.

Eddie opens his eyes and pulls Richie into another kiss, long and gentle this time. His hand goes to the waistband of Richie's jeans, and he mumbles, "gimme a minute, Richie."

"Nah, don't-- don't worry about it, Eds. I'm good." And the thing is-- that actually feels true. He doesn't want to be touched like that, not yet. This is enough for now.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. Besides, you've got some stars to tell me about, right? There's like a billion up there, you'd better get going."

Eddie knits their fingers together as they lie back down. Richie can see the starlight reflected in his dark eyes as he points out something called the Lynx and starts talking about red giants.

The realization blooms as slowly and stubbornly as the first spring flowers through the dirt-- he might be falling in love.

Notes for the Chapter:

Richie Tozier @ the ancient Greeks: "so I've got some notes..."

look, if Andy Musichetti won't give us an updated version of the scene where Richie takes Bev and Ben to the movies then i guESS i have to do it myself.

Belinda Carlisle is the official sponsor of Richie's POV chapters now, apparently.

11. Chapter 11

Notes for the Chapter:

suggested listening for this chapter: "can't go back now" by the weepies.

thanks as always for your lovely comments.

Stan shows up at Eddie's door in late spring, on the first truly nice day of the year. "Do you wanna ride bikes?"

Eddie nods eagerly, before remembering his bicycle, still propped up on its kickstand in the garage. His face falls, and Stan spots it right away. "What's wrong?"

"I... we took the training wheels off, before. But I don't know how to ride without them." Dad was supposed to come back to teach him. He promised. But promises don't really mean anything.

"Oh." Stan looks down at the ground, like he's carefully considering something. "Well. My house isn't far. We could just walk your bike there."

"Why?"

"I have an idea. Go get your bike, okay?"

Eddie nods and runs off to the workshop. He doesn't like being there much anymore. It doesn't smell like Dad, or home, or anything at all. A bunch of cardboard boxes appeared in there a few days after the funeral, and they've continued to grow like a fungus. He doesn't think he's supposed to connect it with the gradual disappearance of every trace of his father's existence from the house, but Eddie Kaspbrak is no fool. He pretends he doesn't see it. That's easier than acknowledging the fact that the pieces of his father's life can be folded up into cardboard boxes and taped up out of sight.

He holds his breath as he passes the threshold, doesn't exhale until he emerges with his black bicycle. Stan is waiting for him, and they walk a few blocks up to Stan's house. It's on a quiet street, lined with tall, old trees.

They don't go inside. Instead, Stan takes off his helmet and hands it to Eddie.

"What?"

"You're gonna fall a bunch, while you're learning. I did. You have to protect your head, or you can get really messed up."

"... what?"

"I'm gonna show you how to ride a bike," Stan says, as if this should be patently obvious. "But you have to put the helmet on first."

"You're gonna teach me?"

"Yeah. I know how. And I still remember my mom teaching me. So that should be easy. She didn't even remember how she learned at first, that was the hardest part."

"Not the falling?"

Stan nods serenely as he adjusts the straps on the helmet. There's a part of Eddie that doesn't trust that assessment, but he doesn't think Stan would lie. He's not even sure Stan knows how to do that.

Eddie gets on the bike and nervously puts up the kickstand. He expects to fall. But Stan is beside him, steadying the bike.

"Don't push me!"

"I'm not. Just pedal, Eddie."

"How fast?"

"Doesn't matter, just pedal!"

Eddie starts slow, not fully trusting that Stan will be able to keep up with him and keep him steady. But he speeds up as Stan keeps pace, silently encouraging him. When he really gets going, Stan lets go.

It's a few seconds of easy gliding down the sidewalk before Eddie realizes what happened. He turns his head to see Stan waving at him. That's when

he panics and the bike wobbles, dumping Eddie and the bike onto some stranger's lawn.

"That was really good, Eddie! I used to fall right away--"

"Why'd you do that?" Eddie whispers, swiping at his eyes in an attempt to stop the tears before they start.

"It's what you're supposed to do. You just needed a little help balancing at first. Let's do it again."

"I don't wanna fall!" Eddie says, crossing his arms across his chest.

"Do you wanna ride a bike? Without the training wheels?"

Eddie nods silently, staring resolutely at the neighbor's mailbox.

"Then you're gonna fall. But it'll be okay. You get better every time you fall. You have a helmet," Stan says, knocking on the plastic for good measure, grinning as Eddie scowls at him. "Come on. I bet you can get way father this time."

"You have to tell me when you let go!"

Stan pauses for a moment, that thoughtful expression on his face, like he's working on a particularly difficult word problem. "Okay. I'll tell you."

Stan is right. Eddie falls about a million times while he's learning.

But he's better every time he gets back up.



On the next phone call with his mother, Eddie makes a tactical error.

He knows he's on thin ice already, after his absence over spring break (she accepted his bullshit explanation about the phone system being down for maintenance over the break, or at least pretended to), but with memories of his father so fresh and raw in his brain, he can't stop the question. He's not sure he wants to.

"Hey, Mom?"

“Yes, Eddie?”

“Can you send me a picture of Dad?”

There's a long enough pause that Eddie worries she hung up. “What?”

“I... I was wondering if you could send me a picture of Dad. I have a couple of us, but none of him, and I've just... I've been thinking about him, lately--”

“I didn't think you remembered.” Her voice is flat, distant, like it's echoing from a lot farther away than Queens, like perhaps a hospital hallway in Derry, over a decade ago.

“I don't remember a lot. But I do remember,” Eddie says. “How we used to make things in the workshop--”

“I'll find you one, Eddie. I've got an early appointment tomorrow, so I'd better go.”

“Thanks, Mom. I really appreciate it.”

“I love you, Eddie.”

“Love you too,” he says quietly, before placing the phone back on its hook.

About a week later, he gets an envelope from his mother, and he carries it carefully up to his room. He slides out a faded copy of the portrait of his father, smiling stiffly in a suit that he never would have worn in life. It's the same one the funeral home propped up on his coffin.

It sits on his desk like a rebuke, like his mother is reminding him from across the country: *he's gone, and I am all that you have.*



Eddie comes home from Stan's with scrapes on both knees and on one of his palms, but he pedals home on his own power, as fast as he can. On his bike, he feels like he can outrun this terrible winter and all the shadows in

his mother's mind, flying straight into a bright sunshiny future.

He drops his bike on the front lawn and takes the steps two at a time, eager to share the news with his mother. Maybe she'll be proud of him for fulfilling a promise to himself. Maybe she'll smile.

She's standing in the living room, still dressed in pajamas even though it's close to dinner time by now, and she gasps as she sees him. "Eddie! What happened?"

"I can ride my bike now!"

But she ignores that, going instead to examine one of his scraped knees, the one that started to bleed a little on the ride home. "You were outside like this? Eddie, you could get an infection..."

The litany of every terrible thing that could have happened to him continues as she hauls him upstairs to the bathroom, setting him up at the counter. She wets a piece of gauze from the first aid kit with yellow iodine, and the sting brings tears to Eddie's eyes. He flinches away on instinct, and she grabs his shoulder with an iron grip, looking him in the eyes with a suffocating mixture of panic and fury. "Do you want to get sick, Eddie? Is that what you want? To end up like Dad?"

The thick, stale smell of that hospital room fills his lungs, and he shakes his head frantically. His chest gets tighter and tighter, as if she's squeezing his ribs and not his shoulder. His breathing gets faster and faster without pulling any air in, and he grabs for his mother, hoping she can understand him even as he can't speak.

This is the first of too many emergency room visits to count.



Eddie's last class is cancelled that Friday, and he's... adrift. Normally, he'd go over to Richie's after classes are over, but Richie's working some extra shifts this weekend (*probably making up for the days he took off for your break*, some guilty voice inside his head whispers) and won't be around until late.

He likes being at Richie's. Richie's apartment reminds him about the good parts of his life. It's harder for the bad parts to chase him down.

Theoretically, he could get ahead on his homework, or read one of the paperback sci-fi novels Richie found for him wherever Richie finds these things, or watch reruns on that little TV until he falls asleep, but he doesn't do any of those things. Instead, he sits on his bed, caught in some kind of strange, restless stasis, his body screaming out the urge to run without his brain providing a destination.

This was normal at home. He thought it didn't have to be like that anymore.

"Fuck this," he finally mutters, getting out of bed and digging through his dresser until he finds a pair of shorts and a t-shirt to toss on.

The late evening air is cool, with a bit of bite in it, and Eddie likes that. He pauses for a moment outside the door to his door, considering for one more moment what he's about today. Fuck it. If his body wants to run, then he can try. Maybe somewhere along the line, he'll figure out where he wants to go.

He starts out slow, more of a jog than anything, winding along the campus paths. Then, once he's off campus, running along quiet residential streets and still breathing in a fairly easy rhythm, he picks up the pace, until he's running full speed down the dark lanes.

This is easy, he thinks as he goes flying past the parties gathered on various front porches, the cars pulling into driveways for the night, the windows filling up with yellow orange light. *I should have started doing this a long time ago.*

He finally comes to a stop in an unfamiliar neighborhood, and he lets out a low whoop of triumph, wiping the sweat away from his forehead.

Then he throws up in someone's hydrangeas.

He swipes at his mouth, grimacing for a moment. That's... not ideal.

But it's still not enough to wipe out the victory of running this far. His heartbeat hammering against his chest is a rhythm he can follow, not a terrible omen he can't escape.

He starts up again at a jog, trying to find his way back to campus on these unfamiliar streets. That quest becomes a bit more urgent when it starts to rain-- a light drizzle at first, and then a torrential downpour.

He realizes, after about ten minutes caught in the rain, that he's in Richie's neighborhood, no more than a block from his house. And sure enough, there's a yellow light gleaming from Richie's window, and Eddie runs up the steps at top speed. This is where he wants to be.

"Eds? What are you--"

Eddie pulls Richie into a kiss before he can finish the sentence, winding his arms around the taller boy's neck. He walks them back until Richie's back hits the wall, and his hands drop to Eddie's waist. "Wait, Eddie, seriously, what the fuck?"

"I went for a run."

"You run now?"

"Since tonight, yeah," Eddie mumbles, going in for another kiss. He wants to escape everything else and just be with Richie right now. And maybe that's not right, to treat someone else like a personal escape pod from your own bullshit, but Eddie doesn't have the time or inclination to unpack that right now.

Richie keeps this kiss short and gentler than Eddie wants right now. "Eddie, you're fucking freezing."

"I forgot my umbrella," he says, with a little laugh, but Richie doesn't laugh, running a hand through Eddie's rain soaked hair..

"I've got some clothes you can borrow, but you should grab a shower, Eddie. I was gonna, but--"

"There's room for two, right?"

Richie looks at him, bemused, one brow arched up. “Man, you’ve used my shower. You know that’s not true.” But Eddie can see the flush creeping up his neck, and he lets out a small, victorious smile.

“Richie, come on.”

“Eds...”

“Richie, please,” he murmurs, tracing his fingertips along the other boy’s cheek.

And Richie relents. “Okay. But seriously, we’re just showering. You’re freezing, you gotta warm up. And this thing gets like two minutes of hot water on a good day. So we can’t... we can’t really be fooling around in there.”

Eddie goes into the bathroom, peeling off his wet clothes. For some reason, that’s what sets off the shivering. He lingers for a moment before stepping under the hot water, letting out a relieved sigh as it pours over him.

Richie steps into the bathroom, holding two towels and setting them on the sink. “Eddie, you sure?”

“Come on, Rich.”

The other boy swallows hard and starts to undress. He’s slow and awkward about it, like he’d really prefer to hide. He slips into the tiny shower stall like a secret, and Eddie immediately turns and kisses him, one hand on Richie’s cheek, the other at the small of his back..

“Hey, no, come on, we’ve only got like a minute of hot water left--”

“I’m warming up!”

“Okay, well, I gotta wash the diner stink off me, so hold off, Eds.”

Eddie pours some body wash on his hands and starts to run his hands along Richie’s shoulders.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m helping.”

Richie lets out a long sound, half laugh and half sigh. “You’re impossible, you know that, right, Eddie Spaghetti? A real pain in the ass.”

“Learned from the best,” Eddie says, grinning at Richie. He lets his hands wander all over the other boy’s body, his fingertips tracing all over his pale skin. You wouldn’t know it to look at him, in his baggy and threadbare clothes, but Richie is lithe and willowy, his body wound up in the lean muscles built up in his hard, endless work. Occasionally, his skin is marked by the silvery pink remnant of some long ago childhood scar that neither of them have stories for yet.

Eddie wants to know those stories. He wants to learn every curve and plane that joins to create this beautiful, baffling person, to learn him by heart, to keep this portrait where it can never be lost.

He can feel the tension ebbing away from Richie under his fingers. *What were you so worried about, Rich?* he wants to ask, but doesn’t. Instead, he leans up to press a gentle kiss to the other boy’s lips, then the spot where his neck meets his shoulder, then his throat.

“Fuck,” Richie breathes, leaning his head back against the tile walls with a soft thud. Eddie drifts lower, trailing his lips down onto Richie’s chest, running his thumb along the other boy’s hipbone. He can already feel Richie reacting, and he smiles up at him before he drops into his knees.

That’s when the water turns ice fucking cold. Eddie gets to his feet with a startled yelp, and Richie laughs as they stumble out to wrap themselves in towels. “Told ya we didn’t have that much time.”

He pulls a t-shirt out of his dresser for Eddie, passing it to him before he pulls on a pair of pajama pants and disappears downstairs for a moment, leaving Eddie alone with the gentle drumming of rain on the windows and the roof.

Eddie pulls the t-shirt on, and all of a sudden, he feels the steady, stubborn tug of exhaustion at his body. He stretches out on Richie’s bed, not even bothering to pull the blanket over himself.

He doesn't even stir when Richie slides back into bed beside him, carefully wrapping an arm around his waist and pressing a kiss to his cheek.



The two of them are in the hammock on their own, late morning light shining through the door of the clubhouse. He's got his legs draped over Richie's as he reads one of the comic books from the stack they've taken to keeping in the clubhouse. The world doesn't seem fully awake yet, and Eddie likes it that way.

Leave it to Richie to ruin it. "What do you wanna be when you grow up?"

"Batman," Eddie says, without looking up from his book.

"Nah, don't even lie, you know you'd be Daredevil. C'mon, Eddie Spaghetti," Richie says, nudging at him with his feet. "But seriously, Eddie."

"I don't know, what about you?"

"I have no fucking clue, that's why I'm asking you."

"What, you're gonna copy me again?"

"Maybe."

Eddie rolls his eyes, then covers his eyes with one hand. "I don't know, Richie. Sometimes... sometimes, I don't think I'm ever gonna get out of here. Like, if I don't disappear, I'll just... be stuck in my house forever." With her, he doesn't need to say. The words hang in the air like smoke.

The hammock creaks dangerously as Richie wriggles around, finally flopping forward, resting his elbows in Eddie's stomach, looking at him from behind those enormous glasses. "Jesus Christ, Richie, ouch--"

"Nah. You're not gonna get stuck here. You're getting out of here if I have to smuggle you out in my backpack."

Eddie looks up at him and the thing is-- the thing is, Richie says it like a

joke, but there's something behind that crooked grin, a supernova bright sincerity, a diamond hard determination. When he says that, Eddie believes him, and something about that scares him, something he can't name. "I won't fit in a backpack, Richie."

"I dunno, man, you're pretty compact, I bet if we squished you down right, we could get you and a couple bags of chips in there," he says, and with that, he lets his head drop down onto Eddie's chest. Eddie wonders if Richie can hear his rabbit-quick heartbeat.

"Get off me, you're crushing me."

"It's compacting, actually--"

Eddie shoves at him, but Richie is suddenly heavy as lead. "Stop," he says, even as he laughs. It turns into a good-natured shoving match, both of them giggling even as the hammock collapses and sends them sprawling onto the dirt floor of the clubhouse. They don't untangle even then, and Eddie is on top of Richie, tickling him until he wheezes.

"What are you guys doing?"

The two of them freeze where they are. Bev is standing at the ladder, one of her hands resting on the rung. She's smiling at them, one corner of her mouth quirked up in her familiar half smile.

"Reading," Richie says, with a perfectly straight face. That's enough to crack Eddie up again, and he collapses onto the floor, giggling helplessly.

"No wonder you guys aren't allowed to sit together in English," she says. She settles on the swing while they go to fix the hammock again. Ben keeps reinforcing it, but Eddie and Richie keep finding new and interesting ways to fuck it up.

Eddie keeps stealing glances over at Richie while they work. He hopes he's right. He hopes they'll make it out of this town, that they all will.

Maybe he and Richie can even make it out together.



Eddie's whole body aches when he wakes up early the next morning. He groans as he stretches, but it's a good feeling. It feels like he accomplished something. He could chase that feeling forever.

He wants to do it again.

His clothes are folded up neatly on the dresser. Richie washed them while he was sleeping, Eddie realizes, a wave of affection crashing over him all at once. The other boy is still asleep beside him, his dark hair a curly, tangled mess, faintly snoring in a way that should be annoying, but instead makes something warm and soft curl up in his chest and make its home there. Eddie runs a hand through Richie's hair for a moment before he leans over and presses a kiss to his cheek before he gets dressed.

He writes a note on a scrap of paper leftover from the last time he was here.

Richie,

Going for a run. Back in a bit.

-- Eddie

The air smells fresh and new from the rain, and he feels cleansed by it. He's not so frantic this morning, concentrating on keeping a steady rhythm as he runs, pushing himself past the ache in his muscles. It helps him get out of his head. His breath keeps going steady, in and out, over and over.

He feels strong, like he can do anything.

His route takes him back to his dorm. He grabs his backpack, filling out with his textbooks and a couple changes of clothes, before looping around back to Richie's apartment again. The other boy is up and rummaging around in the kitchen. Eddie notices his note is on the kitchen table now, where Richie has doodled a rabbit, dressed in aerobics gear and sneakers. He smiles at the drawing, and a camera flash goes off. He looks up, blinking away his confusion, to see Richie there, holding another disposable camera. "Morning, beautiful."

"Fuck off, Richie," Eddie says, although he can't keep back a smile.

"What? You look pretty cute in that getup, now that you don't look like a drowned rat. Here," he says, pressing the disposable camera into Eddie's hand with a small, almost shy smile. "Got you another camera."

Eddie looks up at the other as he holds the camera, baffled again. "I... why?"

"Because you like taking pictures. Duh," Richie says, before turning back to the chaotic jumble of ingredients he's going to turn into some kind of breakfast for them. Eddie lifts the camera up and takes a photo of the other boy as he works, brow furrowed in concentration, then another of him twirling a whisk like a baton, and another of the boy coming for him with messy, flour covered hands.

They kiss in the sunlit kitchen, and for just that moment, Eddie doesn't care about the mess that they're making. His whole body feels warm and filled with light, and he never wants to lose this.



Eddie is fourteen, and this is the last day he will ever spend in Derry. He's taking a walk through the house, a checklist folded up and forgotten in his back pocket. His old bedroom is empty and bare, like no one's ever lived there. He stares around it for a moment, trying to wrap his mind around the fact that when he walks out this door, he'll never come back. It will lock behind him, and he will walk away like all the years in this house never happened.

He should feel free, but he doesn't.

He lingers for a moment in the kitchen doorway, freshly repainted to cover some makeshift growth chart that hasn't been updated since he was six years old. That's a strange thought-- some little time capsule of him, forever six years old and tiny, captured under that barn door red paint.

His footsteps echo in the empty house, and he feels like a ghost in someone else's life. Maybe he can't leave after all. Maybe he'll be trapped here forever, drifting through a stranger's life, only visible after midnight, in

flickering lights and dark mirrors--

He grabs for his inhaler and breathes the medicine in deep, relieved to feel the air in his lungs.

He's leaning up against the side door, looking out at the dark and empty garage. Something is pulling him out there, which is... weird. He'd never spent much time out there, really. It's just filled with his mother's boxed up old junk, or it used to be.

"Eddie bear, it's time to go!"

He turns and walks down the hall to the front door. The realtor locks up behind them, and Eddie climbs into the back seat, settling in with his backpack full of books. He doesn't open them up yet. He wants to watch Derry go by out the window, disappearing out of his life into someone else's. First, it's the neat little postage stamp lawns of his neighborhood, and then the little shops that grow taller and merge into the red brick of downtown Derry, the gray brick of the library, the bright plastic grin of the lumberjack statue, the neon sign of the Capitol theater.

He can see a boy his age, tall and rangy, dark hair blown free in the summer wind, dressed in a loud flowered button up. He recognizes that kid from school, he thinks. Richie something, maybe starts with a T. They used to hang out in middle school, he thinks, before Eddie got put in the college prep classes. Sometimes he gets little glimpses of the two of them hanging out at the Capitol, riding their bikes up and down the streets of Derry. But those memories are too blurry to make sense of, really.

They still say hi to each other in the hall, or on the street, but that's all. They're not really friends. Eddie doesn't really have those.

That doesn't stop Richie's face from lighting up with a grin when he recognizes Eddie in the car window, and he waves at him, pulling a goofy face like a rubber Halloween mask.

Eddie laughs to himself and waves back at him, sticking his tongue out like a little kid. Richie laughs and copies the expression, even though he nearly crashes into a trash can in the process.

His mother turns in the opposite direction, to get on the highway that will

take them out of Derry forever.

He wonders if Richie realizes that he was waving goodbye.

He wonders why that thought makes his chest ache like an open wound.

Notes for the Chapter:

you ever take up a hobby out of sheer stubbornness?

please picture Ben Hanscom, fixing the hammock for
the one hundredth fucking time.

12. Chapter 12

Notes for the Chapter:

suggested listening for this chapter: "steady love" by evergreen.

what is this? an almost on time update? that's wild.

thank you as always for your lovely and supportive comments. <3

Spring begins to wind its way towards summer. The snow has melted, the rain has finally stopped, and Richie can open up the windows up his apartment and let the warm breeze drift through. He would be so glad, except... except.

When summer gets there, when all his papers are turned in, when he's taken all his exams, Eddie will have to pack up his dorm room and go back home. Not to Richie's apartment, but his real home, back in Queens.

It's not a surprise, exactly. But it isn't a thought Richie goes chasing. Until pretty recently, he's been happy to cram a lid on it and stuff it in the doomsday closet of his brain.

But as the days get warmer, that thought keeps getting out and whispering a countdown. *One month. Three weeks. Two weeks. One week...*

Today, as he sits on the roof of the pizza place with Lou, it's *four days*, over and over. The stars are only faintly visible from downtown, and Richie can't trace out the constellations Eddie's been showing him. Then the weather shifts and they're blotted out under cloud cover, completely invisible. So he just sips his beer and sits on the ledge, watching people trickle home from the bars.

"So, you got any fun summer plans?"

Richie snorts. "Oh, yeah. I'll be going to my family's place on Cape Cod, like every year, you know?"

She laughs and puts her bottle down. "Richie."

"I'm gonna stay here and keep working my ass off. One of Donna's friends wants me to do a comedy night at his bar, and he'll pay me for it," he says, and he can't hold back a small, proud smile at that.

It's a smile Lou returns. "That's awesome, Richie. Good for you."

"Thanks. What about you?"

She shrugs and takes a sip of her own beer. "I'm taking some summer classes, making up for changing my major twice. And working my ass off, same as you. What about Friday?"

"I don't know. I only work the diner that day, and that's in the morning. Why?"

"Chrissie's having an end of semester party at my place. You should come. Bring Eddie, if he's still around."

Richie puts a hand on his head and runs it back through his hair, buying time as he thinks about the answer. "He's got his last exam Friday afternoon. So he'll be around--"

"Great, ask him!"

He barely manages to hold back a grimace as his thoughts drift to half a dozen high school parties, clutching a beer he was too afraid to drink, running his mouth through the whole tried and true catalog of Richie Tozier bits to get any laugh he could.

"I don't know if he's big into parties--"

"So ask him," Lou says, as if this should be perfectly obvious. And maybe it is, to anybody but Richie. He finishes his beer and sets it aside, looking up at the flat blue expanse of clouds where the stars should be.

"Richie. Are you gonna ask him?"

"Yeah, Lou. I'm gonna ask him. Don't worry about it."

“Good. I wanna meet the legendary Eddie.”

“God, please don't call him that, he'll be impossible to live with,” he sighs.

“Hey, man, you're the one who talked him up.”

Richie smiles to himself. “Yeah. I guess I am. Here, gimme that,” he says, holding a hand out for Lou's empty bottle. “I have to head out. Good luck on your finals.”

“Yeah, I need it,” she laughs, clapping him on the shoulder companionably as he holds the door open for her.

“Nah, you're gonna crush it.”

He tosses the two bottles handily into the dumpster and walks back to his apartment. Eddie's makeshift desk is empty, except for the little notebook Richie has taken to writing some of his ideas for bits down in.

Most of it is crap, and he can't read his own handwriting about a quarter of the time, but there's some things in there that he could really make shine.

He sits down at the desk and tries to sketch out some idea he had at work earlier about the difference between drunk food and hangover food, but he can't quite make it stick. His mind keeps wandering back along the now well-worn paths through the fog, trying to find some new place he can bring back to Eddie, to put together this puzzle of who they really are.

True to form, he doesn't come back with an answer-- at least, not one that makes any sense to him.



Richie sits on the riverbank, where the grass turning yellow in the hot, dry summer is almost tall enough to hide him. He came out here to skip stones, or look for weird shit washed up on the banks of the Kenduskeag. At least, that was what he told himself as he rode his bike down here.

But really, he came out here for the rustle of the grass, the gurgle of the river, and the distant rumble of traffic to drown out the thoughts in his head. If people think the way I run my mouth is bad, they should hear how loud it gets in here, he thinks with a rueful half-smile, pressing a hand to his temple, as if that will muffle the cacophony of his thoughts somehow. Sometimes, it's like someone dropped an entire marching band down the stairs, each member playing a different one of his brain's greatest hits-- "You Could Disappear Too," "The Bowers Gang Blues," "What If Your Friends Don't Like You After All?," "Eddie Smiles, But Not At You," and that perennial favorite, "You Fucked Up (Again or Still)."

That last one wouldn't be terrible as a real song, actually. He can definitely imagine it playing really late at night, on the radio stations he listens to with the volume down almost as low as it will go, music with an almost electric kind of anger, the kind of songs that want to scream the world down and build a new one in its place.

There's a part of him that sings back that anger, because it has nowhere else to go.

If he let it, it could eat him alive.

Instead, he'll spin it around and turn it into a joke. People like him a little better that way, he finds. He can't be the person they want him to be, but maybe he can be funny enough that they want him around anyway.



Eddie shows up Friday afternoon, hauling a suitcase and his backpack. Richie smiles as he hears his footsteps up the staircase, and he's there to take the suitcase off his hands. "Hey. How'd your exam go?"

"It was awful. I stayed almost the whole time, I was the last one there," Eddie sighs, leaning up for a kiss.

"Maybe you're the only one who got it right."

Eddie laughs, shaking his head. "We'll see, I guess. So when's this party?"

“Lou said we could stop by any time after five.”

Eddie goes into his suitcase and starts digging through neatly folded clothes as Richie looks on, baffled. “Uh, what are you doing?”

“Changing for the party. I think I might shower too-- I was still cleaning out my room until right before my exam, I'm pretty sure I smell like spray cleaner.”

“It's not like... formal or anything, Eddie, you don't have to get dressed up--”

“Doesn't mean I have to smell like Windex either, though.”

“You could just tell people it's your new cologne.”

Eddie laughs and pulls out his clothes, tucking them under his arm. “I don't think I will, actually,” he says, breezing past Richie to the bathroom.

Richie goes to dig through his own dresser, pulling out shirt after shirt, before he finally decides on what is, charitably speaking, one of the worst shirts he owns.

He's sprawled across the couch with a cookbook when Eddie emerges, dressed in khakis and a yellow and black striped rugby shirt, his hair quickly drying in its artful waves. He tilts his head as he reads the shirt out loud, Richie tossing the book aside and giving an exaggerated stretch so he can do so even more easily.

““Women want me, fish fear me...?””

“Isn't it great?”

“Where did you even get that?”

“I helped Donna clean out her garage, and she told me I could have anything I hauled out of there. Found a whole treasure trove of shit her ex-husband didn't bother to take with him when he moved out.”

“I can't imagine why,” Eddie says, rolling his eyes. Terrible fashion crimes aside, he still wedges himself on the couch on top of Richie,

resting his head on the other boy's chest. Richie smiles and strokes a hand through Eddie's hair, careful as he can be not to mess it up.

"Hey, what time is your bus tomorrow?"

"Noon," Eddie sighs. "It was that or leave at three in the morning on Sunday."

"Gross." "Yeah. My mom didn't like that option. But we've got tonight."

Richie nods, pressing a kiss to Eddie's forehead. "Yeah, we do."

"What time do you wanna go?"

"Whenever you want. I know the way there."

Eddie lets out a little contented hum and rests his head back down on Richie's chest before he answers. "Not for a little bit, okay?"

"Okay, Eds."



The year Richie turns fourteen, his mother offers to throw him a party. There's something almost apologetic about the way she offers it to him in the car on the way to school, like a consolation prize for all the long and very serious conversations his parents keep having at the dining room table without him.

"It wouldn't be very big, but I could put something together for you and your friends."

Richie barely manages to hold back a snort. He knows both of them have had their own thing going on, but surely one of them has figured out that he doesn't really have those. But his mom means well. No need to make her worry any more than she already does. "Nah, Mom, that's okay."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, my friends and I were just gonna get pizza or something, the day

of. No big deal. Parties are kind of dorky, you know?"

The lie is easy, a little bit too easy. But it passes muster. His mom lets out a laugh, but there's something a little watery in the sound, like it's threatening tears. "You know, when I was your age, I always swore, I wouldn't be like my parents. I'd know what was cool, I'd know exactly what my kids wanted..."

Her voice trails off, and Richie feels obligated to fill the quiet the only way he knows how. "I mean, when you were my age, weren't you fighting off pterodactyls to pick up your mail from the Pony Express?"

He expects a reprimand, something to remind him that he's the kid in this situation. But instead, his mother lets out another one of those fragile little laughs. "I suppose it probably seems that way to you. I know it did to me."

She gazes off into the rainy parking lot, and suddenly, Richie can see his mother here in the Derry high school parking lot twenty years ago, dressed in the cheerleading uniform he's seen in her old pictures, not a pterodactyl in sight. Sitting here like he is, waiting for her real life to begin.

He's struck with the sudden urge to give her a hug. It's a bizarre urge-- no one in the Tozier clan is a particularly huggy person. He can't even remember them doing that outside of holidays, or photo poses.

At the last moment, he chickens out and holds his hand out for a high five. She looks at him, amused, and gives him a hesitant high five. "Have a good day, okay?"

"I'll do my best, Mom."

"That's all I ever want from you, Richie. You know that, right?"

He freezes for a moment in the car door, like a thief caught in the act. She says that so earnestly, like it's something urgently important, and not the moral at the end of a particularly half assed after school special. What's he supposed to do with that?

"See you, Mom," he calls over his shoulder.

On the weekend of his birthday, she slips a twenty dollar bill into his jacket pocket for the fictional pizza dinner with his equally fictional

friends. He spends the entire day at the Capitol, watching movie after movie, until his brain feels hungover as he stumbles out of the dark theater and into the dark streets.



It's almost dark when they get to Lou's. She lives in a second floor walk-up, and they can hear the sounds of laughter and music before they're even halfway up the stairs.

"I thought you said this was just a couple people."

Before Richie can reply, Lou throws the door open and pulls Richie into a hug. "Hey, man! Glad you could make it!"

"Glad to be here," he says as they step into the small, chaotic apartment.

"And this must be the legendary Eddie," she says, offering a handshake to the other boy with what can only be described as a shit-eating grin.

Eddie blinks rapidly, his brow furrowed in confusion. "The what?"

"Jesus Christ, Lou," Richie says, running a hand back through his hair.

"He talks about you all the time, kid, it's obnoxious. I feel like I'm meeting the president."

Eddie starts to go red, averting his eyes. "Um. Nice to meet you?"

Richie puts an arm around his shoulder. "That's Lou. She's horrible."

"What's horrible is that fuckin' shirt, Richie. Worst thing I've ever seen. I want three of em."

He gives a little bow, and Eddie sighs. "Don't encourage him."

"What can I say, I'm a terrible friend. Drinks and food are in the kitchen, bathroom's at the end of the hall, and I'll introduce you to

everyone once I find out where my girlfriend disappeared to.”

There's not a place to sit in the entire apartment, so Richie and Eddie end up leaning up against the wall by Lou's massive collection of potted plants. The music is louder over here, almost as loud as the way his heart starts pounding when Eddie takes his hand.

“Sorry about that.”

“What are you apologizing for, Richie?” Eddie says, genuinely confused, like it's a real question, like it's not a given that Richie should always be apologizing for something. The idea fills Richie's chest with warmth, and he leans in and kisses Eddie, as if they're not in a room full of people.

They break the kiss, but don't pull away. If anything, they get closer, Eddie pressing his back against Richie's chest, Richie winding his arms around Eddie's waist.

A camera flashes, and Richie's blinking it away, finding in front of him a girl with long curly hair and a bright smile, holding a Polaroid camera. “Are you Richie?”

“Uh... yeah. Why?”

She laughs and holds out a hand, slinging the camera around her neck with a strange kind of tipsy grace. She tucks the photo into the pocket of the apron she is improbably wearing and then rushes over to give each of them a hug. “I'm Chrissie! I'm so glad to meet you, Lou says you're hilarious--”

“I try.”

“And you're...” Her voice trails off as she looks at Eddie, trying to place him.

“I'm Eddie.”

Her face lights up, and she gives Richie an almost mischievous smile. “That's awesome!”

“Why were you taking pictures?” Eddie asks, more curious than wary.

She goes to her apron and brandishes a handful of other Polaroids, fanning them out like a card shark. "Art project! Wanna see?"

"Sure--"

She takes Eddie's hand before he can finish talking and leads him off into the crowd, leaving Richie to sit among a bunch of potted plants and people watch.

"Aw, what the fuck, you lost yours too?"

"Hey, don't look at me, Lou, I'm pretty sure yours kidnapped him."

"So you guys have met."

"Yeah. I think Chrissie and Eddie'll get along great, they're both shutterbugs."

Lou winces as she takes a sip from her cup. "Did she get all up in your face with the camera?"

"No, but I'm still seeing spots from that flash."

"Yeah, it's her new project. She got it for her birthday and she's been papering my walls with it ever since." Lou's trying to sound annoyed, but she's smiling anyway.

"What's the art project?"

"'Life In An Instant.' That's the working title, anyway. She takes at least one picture every day for the whole year. And then makes a collage or something. We're not a hundred percent on what happens after that. But she thinks she might make it her thesis project."

"That's cool."

"You're not the one who has to live with the paparazzi in their apartment every day."

Richie laughs, rolling his eyes. "Yeah, no, I think her and Eddie'll get along real well."

“Did she say where she was kidnapping him to?”

“Something about going to look at art projects.”

Lou finishes her cup and sets it down on one of the tables full of potted plants. “Then I think I know where they are. Follow me.” She leads the way through the crowd of people, and they only get waylaid a few times by little conversations and introductions that Richie can barely hear and has to mostly bullshit his way through.

Finally, they make it to a bedroom down the hall. The walls are covered in art of all kinds-- photos, paintings, charcoal sketches, stuff Richie isn't even sure how to describe. Eddie and Chrissie are sitting on the floor together, flipping through a photo album full of Polaroids.

“So it's all about like, capturing all these bits and pieces of life, the ones we might not necessarily remember otherwise? These little perfect moments we need to remember when it gets bad--”

“Baby, what did I say about kidnapping guests?” Lou says, dropping on the floor beside her and kissing her on the cheek.

“It wasn't kidnapping, he wanted to come. Right, Eddie?”

“These are really cool, Chrissie,” Eddie murmurs, turning the pages on his own. Chrissie beams at him and hands over the camera. “Here, you take it for a little bit. I think I have to play hostess for a while.”

“Yeah, you do, a bunch of your art school friends showed up, and I have no idea how to talk to them.”

“They're more scared of you than you are of them,” Chrissie says airily, wagging a finger at Lou.

“You say that every time, and yet, here we are. C'mon,” Lou says, helping Chrissie to her feet and disappearing back into the party.

Eddie is still holding the camera, delight written all over his smile. That's a sight Richie would look at for hours if he could. “You made a friend pretty fast, huh?”

“Her art is cool,” he says, smiling as he gets to his feet, looking out at the world through that viewfinder. He finally stops in front of the full length mirror by their closet, lingering there with the camera. “Hey, Rich, c'mere.”

Richie steps up behind him, a confused smile playing on his lips as he wraps his arms around Eddie's waist, tucking his chin over the other boy's shoulder. “What? It's a mirror.”

The camera clicks and flashes, and Eddie smiles and tucks the photo into his back pocket.

“Aw, come on, we gotta try again, I wasn't ready.”

“Ready for what?”

In answer, Richie presses a kiss to Eddie's cheek, holding him right in that moment. Eddie seems to get the message, and the camera clicks and flashes again.

Eddie turns around and kisses Richie, a hand on either side of his face to pull him closer. Richie closes his eyes and they linger together in this moment, swaying softly to the muffled rhythm of the song in the living room.

“We should probably go back out there,” Eddie whispers.

“Why,” Richie mumbles, gently squeezing the other boy's hip.

“I don't know, I just feel like it'd be kind of weird to make out in your friend's bedroom?”

“Is that what you wanna do right now?” Richie says, a half smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“I mean... yeah. But not here,” Eddie says, a blush creeping into his cheeks. Richie doesn't argue, just leans in to give Eddie another kiss, this one sweet and brief.

“Lead the way, Eds.”

If Richie thought the party was in full swing before, it's really roaring

now. There's a crowd of people on a makeshift dance floor in the living room, and even the people who aren't dancing are screaming the lyrics. It's the kind of chaos that Richie loves to watch. He and Eddie find a newly vacated spot on the couch, the other boy settling in his lap. Richie stares up at him for a moment, trying to drown out the hissing whispers at the back of his head, the ones telling him that this isn't safe, no matter whose party this is. Then he sets a hand on Eddie's hip, smiling up at him.

The smile he gets back is almost enough to drown out his worries.

He ends up all tangled in a deeply involved conversation about *Nightmare on Elm Street* with a guy sitting in the armchair next to them. "Okay, but Freddy makes more sense without the whole bullshit nun backstory. Plus, he's scarier without it."

"I don't know, I think being destined from birth to be evil is pretty scary."

"But what if it's all about making the choice to be evil? Being able to be good or at least neutral and then choosing to do the thing that hurts people, that's way scarier than just being stuck on the evil track forever--"

"I'm gonna go get some air," Eddie whispers, before sliding off Richie's lap and walking towards the kitchen.

"He's cute," the guy Richie has been arguing with says.

"Uh... thanks. It was good talking with you. Destiny is a bullshit idea, by the way. Have a great night," Richie says, waving goodbye as he's climbing up off the couch and following Eddie.

The kitchen is empty when he gets there, which bales him until he sees the screen door between the fridge and the cabinets. He steps out onto a flat section of the roof over the downstairs apartment's back porch. Eddie is sitting with his back against the siding, looking up at the stars.

"You okay, Eds?"

"I'm fine, it's just hot in there. You win that argument?"

"No, but I bailed before he could come up with a reason I was wrong, so that's basically the same, right?"

"I thought you made some good points."

"I tried," Richie says with a shrug, sitting down beside Eddie, pulling one of his knees up to his chest. "So what's up there tonight?"

"You can see the Centaur pretty good tonight."

"Lemme guess, it's those three faint dots over there," Richie says, gesturing over at some far corner of the sky. Eddie laughs and puts his hand on top of Richie's, tracing out the shape. "No, it's here. See?"

"Damn. That actually looks like a fucking centaur."

"Yep. Thought you'd like that."

They sit in the closest they can get to quiet at the moment, just the distant sound of the music through the walls, looking up at the stars, their fingers still entwined.

It's a good moment. Richie ruins it with a stupid question, because that's one of the things he does best. "Hey, Eddie?"

"Yeah, Richie?"

"What are we doing? Like, are we...?"

"Are we what?"

"Nah, man, forget it, it's dumb," he says, looking down from the stars to the streets below.

Eddie elbows him, then rests his head on Richie's shoulder. "No, it's not. Are we what?"

"Are we... dating? Like, are you my... my boyfriend, or whatever?" Richie tries to sound casual about it, but as soon as he says it, he wants to take it back-- that's probably one of those things where, if you have to ask, you definitely aren't. And he's not sure what he's going to do with that answer when he gets it. He takes off his glasses

like he's going to clean them, but he just holds them there to take the world out of focus for a little bit.

“Richie...”

“It's okay.”

“I thought we were?”

“What?”

There's a trace of laughter in Eddie's voice, but there's nothing cruel in it, just bemusement. He rubs his thumb in gentle circles along the back of Richie's hand. “I mean... I'm at your place almost every weekend. You took me stargazing. You made me a desk.”

“You were working on the floor, it was gonna fuck up your back--”

“And I know we hadn't like, talked about it yet, but when Chrissie asked who you were, I told her you were my boyfriend. So...”

Richie can't talk for a moment. Eddie said that, before he even asked. He thought of Richie like that.

“So... we are?”

“Yeah, Rich. I think so,” Eddie replies, squeezing his hand. Richie leans over and kisses him, long and slow and sweet as he can. The other boy-- his boyfriend, he thinks, with the kind of giddy excitement that you're probably supposed to leave behind when you graduate high school, but hey, he skipped that particular milestone, let him have this one good thing in his weird fucking life. Let him revel in the taste of Eddie's mouth, Eddie's fingers tangled in his hair, *Eddie--*

“Richie?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you wanna get out of here?”

Richie nods hurriedly, unable to hold back a smile. “After you,

Eddie,” he says, helping him to his feet.

They make their way through the party, Eddie leading the way through the crowd, determined to get them out. They're almost at the door when someone taps him on the shoulder.

“I stole this out of Chrissie's apron. Thought you might want it,” Lou says, offering him yet another Polaroid photo.

“Thanks. This was fun, thanks for inviting us--”

“It was great to meet you, Lou,” Eddie says, smiling, his hand already on the door.

“No problem, Eddie. Have a good summer, okay?”

“Will do,” he says, leading Richie out onto the dark and quiet street. It's only a few blocks to Richie's apartment, and Eddie practically runs the whole way there, Richie trailing behind him. They barely make it into the apartment before Eddie is on him again, backing him against the wall, his arms around Richie's neck. There's nothing gentle about this-- both of them are clumsy and sloppy with how much they want to touch each other. Richie guides them gently back toward the bed, which is no easy feat when they can barely pull away enough to move.

With a gentle push, Eddie sends him backwards onto the bed, colliding into the mattress. Then he's climbing into bed with Richie, straddling his hips, a warm and welcome weight there. He leans down and kisses Richie again, one hand on his cheek, the other stroking down his throat to his chest, finally coming to a stop at the hem of Richie's shirt. He looks down at Eddie, those gorgeous brown eyes equal parts questions and want. All Richie can do is nod, lifting his arms so Eddie can tug his shirt off.

“Were you just trying to get rid of that?” he says, because somehow he just can't ever control his mouth, even when it matters as much as it does in this moment.

Eddie leans in to whisper in Richie's ear, so close that his lips brush against the cup of his ear as he speaks, sending a wildfire thrill

tearing up and down his spine. "Yeah, you caught me, Rich. This whole thing has been a plot to get rid of your terrible fucking shirt." One of Eddie's hands is trailing down Richie's chest, this time stopping at the button of his torn up jeans, thumb circling for a moment before he undoes it and starts to tug them down. Richie takes a deep breath and lifts his hips to get out of them.

He pulls at Eddie's clothes like he's unwrapping a present he's been waiting for all his life, and when Eddie settles back in his lap, only their respective boxers between them, this whole night feels like a fucking gift, the kind trainwrecks like him don't deserve.

Eddie trails kisses down his throat, rocks his hips down as he bites the soft skin there, almost experimentally, like he's trying to figure out what will happen if he does that. And that... that's a whole different feeling, that's what that is, something warm and low and deep, something that flows from deep in Richie's tangled disaster of a brain brain all the way down south. He lets out a sharp, wordless gasp, and Eddie pulls away, looking down at him with concern. "Richie? You okay?"

"I-- yeah, Eds, I'm good, I'm real fuckin' good, yeah," he mumbles, pulling his boyfriend down into another clumsy, sloppy kiss. He rests his hands on Eddie's hips, then hooks his fingers under the elastic of the band as Eddie bites his throat again.

He tugs Eddie's boxers free and tosses them aside, letting his hands wander over his thighs, strong from the running he's been doing. He traces his fingers from the back of Eddie's knee to the spot where his thigh meets his ass, over and over until Eddie rolls them both over on their sides in the bed, pulling Richie's boxers down and off.

Then there's nothing between them but their breath, and they pause for a moment, staring into each other's eyes, like this is some new cliff they're about to dive off of. Then Richie pulls Eddie in close for another kiss, and Eddie shifts around so that he's got one leg between Richie's, the other hooked over his hip. Richie wraps one arm around Eddie's, then slides his other hand down to Eddie's hip, keeping them together.

Neither of them really knows what they're doing, but that doesn't

seem to matter so much. This all feels so impossibly close and intimate, and Richie closes his eyes and loses himself in their hips rocking together, Eddie's soft moans, the sweet friction of their bodies.

Their rhythm goes from slow and gentle to rough and frantic, as Eddie gets closer, whispering beautiful nonsense into Richie's ear-- "fuck, Rich, please, harder..." And Richie can't really do anything but oblige him, grinding his hips against Eddie's, chasing more of those sounds. He's rewarded with a wordless moan as Eddie comes, his head thrown back against the pillows, eyes closed, hair tousled beyond redemption, mouth open and begging to be kissed again. Richie leans over and kisses him again, only to let out a groan of his own as Eddie wraps his fingers around his dick, stroking along him. He moans Eddie's name, like that's the only thing in his head.

Eddie's voice is in his ear, low and breathless. "You gonna come for me, Rich?" he whispers, and his voice is what sends him over the edge more than any other sensation.

They lie there for a few moments, letting their breathing level out. Richie feels like the luckiest bastard alive.

He gets up and swipes his t-shirt from where it was abandoned on the floor, using it to clean them both up. Eddie is already half asleep when he tosses it aside and turns out the light.

Richie slides back into bed beside Eddie, wrapping his arms around his slender waist and pulling him close. He presses a kiss to the top of his head, closes his eyes, and tries to pretend like Eddie won't be leaving in the morning.

Notes for the Chapter:

please-- give me more ideas for terrible t-shirts that Richie would wear. i'm terrified that i've peaked with "women want me, fish fear me."

13. Chapter 13

Notes for the Chapter:

suggested listening: "come to my window" by Melissa Etheridge.

also, sorry that this chapter is both much shorter and much later than expected-- currently experiencing a Perfect Storm of school/work/health/family/life fuckery here at chez kitsch. it should be straightened out here in the next few weeks, but in the meantime, my writing time is... severely curtailed. sorry! :(

Richie says it like it's good news.

"You're going to summer camp?" Eddie can't hold back the dismay in his voice. Richie's smile slowly shrinks, and it disappears completely as he scuffs his feet through the dirt under the swing set.

"Yeah. I guess. It looks okay, they've got archery and stuff..." but his voice trails off, like he's run out of things to say. Eddie looks away, up at the bright blue spring sky, chewing at his lower lip to try and stop himself from crying. Richie's probably going to give him shit for that-- they're almost twelve, after all, way too big for that.

But he doesn't. "Eddie Spaghetti, what's wrong?"

"Everyone's leaving," he whispers, still looking up at the sky.

"I'm not leaving, I'm just gonna go to some dumb camp for a couple weeks, and I'm gonna hate it the whole time, probably--"

"But Stan's going on vacation, and you'll be gone... what am I gonna do?"

"It's just a couple weeks, Eddie."

"You don't understand," he says, almost too soft to hear. A couple weeks alone in the house with her, with no one to run to when the air in that house gets still and suffocating... it might as well be years. He can ride his bike until he runs out of sidewalk, but it never feels like an escape without

the two of them by his side.

"I could write to you. Letters and stuff."

Eddie pauses, his brow furrowed. "Do people really do that? Like, in real life?"

"I think so. I can."

"Do you promise?"

Richie reaches over to Eddie, in what starts as a high five but ends with their hands clasped together for just a moment, in a reassuring squeeze. "Yeah, Eddie. I promise."

Eddie doesn't really believe in promises anymore. But for Richie, he smiles back and tries to.



Eddie wakes up first to the morning sunshine coming through the window. He sits up, watching the light dance through the leaves on the tree outside the apartment window. He can hear the sound of Richie snoring faintly beside him, and he turns his head to look down at the other boy. He's never seen him so quiet and still, just the steady rise and fall of his chest.

It's strangely serene, a moment he wants to capture and carry with him, folded up for when the world seems impossible. He reaches over to get the camera from its spot on the makeshift bedside table. There's one exposure left in it. He might as well make it count.

It's not until after he takes the picture that he sees two faint, round marks on Richie's throat, and he realizes, blush creeping up his neck, that he left those. Richie will catch a glimpse of those in the morning and remember, *he was here with me.*

Eddie lays back down, slowly resting his head on Richie's shoulder, closing his eyes, trying to match his breathing and follow him back down to steal just a few more moments of sleep.

Richie comes back up to meet him instead. "Time is it," he mumbles, his voice thick and hoarse from sleep as he turns his head to press a kiss to Eddie's temple.

Eddie glances quickly at his watch. "8:30," he says with a small sigh, meeting Richie in a soft, gentle kiss.

"Fuck. What--"

"Noon," Eddie says, answering the question before Richie can even finish it. He shifts around until he's on his stomach on top of Richie, resting his head on his chest, listening to his steady heartbeat. Richie rests a hand in his hair, gently stroking his fingers through Eddie's dark, sleep tousled waves.

"You're not gonna forget me, right?" Richie says it like a joke, but the crooked smile on his lips doesn't quite make it to his eyes. Eddie looks up at him, trying to commit to the deepest parts of his brains the long, winding, tangled lines that come together to make this man, tracing them together like a constellation.

"I won't, Richie."

"Promise?"

Eddie bites his lip and leans in for a kiss, his fingers tangling in Richie's curls. He wants to make that promise, but he's not sure he can, if that fog creeps back into his head again. Maybe this is enough.



Stan and Eddie are walking home after the movies, some dumb action movie they can barely remember after it's over. It's a hot and humid summer night, the last one before Stan leaves on vacation. Richie left for camp two days ago.

"What are you gonna do in Florida?"

"Read, mostly. My great aunt has a pool at her apartment complex. I might go swimming." The faint wrinkle creasing Stan's nose says otherwise. That's a sad thought too-- Stan drifting alone in a pool full of

old people. Richie might be able to make that funny, but it just makes Eddie sad.

“Oh.”

“What are you gonna do here?”

“I dunno.” Creep around the house like a dust bunny, probably, trying to stay out of sight. But that's not something he wants to lay on Stan. It's not his fault. It's not anyone's fault.

An uneasy quiet settles between the two of them. There's something Stan wants to say, Eddie can see that much in the furrow of his brow and the nervous drumming of his fingers against his thighs. He keeps glancing over at Stan, waiting for him to say whatever it is he needs to say.

He doesn't do it until they're at Eddie's porch, his hand on the doorknob to go inside.

“You know Richie's probably not going to write you like he said, right?” Stan blurts it out all at once, dropping the words like a burden too heavy for him to carry. “He... I know he said he would. But you know how Richie is.”

Eddie stands there in the doorway, his palm resting on the painted white wood of the frame. The thing is... he knows. He knows Richie. Richie, who couldn't keep his homework together if his life depended on it, who packed his lunch twice this year and left it to fossilize on the top shelf of his locker both times, whose bedroom always looks like a bomb went off in a Where's Waldo puzzle.

But he saw Richie packing his bag for camp, throwing in the yellow notepads he stole from his mother's desk and the colored pencils rubber banded together in a riotous bundle, and in that moment, he let himself believe in that promise.

“Yeah, Stan. I know,” he says softly.

“He's not a bad person, he's not doing it to be mean, he just...”

“He forgets,” Eddie says. “I know. Have fun in Florida, okay?”

"I will."

Eddie only waits by the mailbox for the first day. After that, he knows better.



Richie walks him to the bus stop, waits with him on the bench in the hot noon sun. "Fuck," he mutters to himself as the bus pulls up, fifteen minutes behind schedule.

"What?"

"Was kinda hoping it wouldn't show. Then we could have one more day, you know?" he says, bumping his elbow against Eddie's.

They stand up, watching the bus come to a stop, and Richie sighs softly, pulling Eddie into a hug. Eddie closes his eyes and wraps his arms around Richie's shoulders, squeezing as tight as he can, wishing with everything in him that he could just kiss him goodbye.

Richie lets go and hauls Eddie's suitcase up the steps for him. "Remember, no bus weirdos."

"I don't talk to weirdos anywhere, Rich."

His boyfriend arches up one eyebrow, grinning at him. "Then how'd you get stuck with me, Eds?"

Eddie can't help but smile. "Yeah, okay. See you in August. Be safe, okay?"

"Will do!" Richie calls, backing away to let the bus doors close. He waves to Eddie as the bus pulls away, still smiling. Eddie watches until he disappears out of sight.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out the two Polaroids from the night before. The second one is his favorite-- the two of them, reflected in that tall mirror in Lou and Chrissie's apartment, Richie smiling as he kisses Eddie's cheek, the camera flash reflected back and making it look like Eddie is holding the sun in his hand, holding

everything bright in this world.



Eddie is on his porch, the same hand-me-down Hardy Boys book he's read a hundred times open in this lap, stretched out flat against the floor, sinking down to avoid the sticky, clingy summer heat.

He hears Richie before he sees him, taking the steps two at a time, stomping hard enough to bring the house down around both their ears. "What the hell, Eddie Spaghetti? You melt?"

Eddie jumps up at once, dropping the book and forgetting it completely as he scrambles over to give the other boy a hug. "Richie!"

He's still wearing an ugly orange camp t-shirt, and it smells like bug spray and sweat and pine trees. Eddie is almost startled when he pulls away and goes to pull his backpack down off his shoulders. "See, the thing is-- I meant to write you--"

"It's fine, Richie, I figured you were busy," Eddie says, but Richie is scrabbling through his disaster of a backpack, past comic books and socks and notebooks in order to pull out a thick stack of envelopes. He offers them out sheepishly, not quite able to meet Eddie's eyes.

"And I remembered everything but stamps, and I didn't have any money so... I still wrote you every day, you're just getting them all now!"

Eddie holds the envelopes in his hands carefully, like something precious. Richie keeps on talking a mile a minute, the way he does when the quiet gets too close to some secret part of him. "And this way you can read em all at once, like a book-- it'd beat the shit out of the Hardy Boys, anyway, right?"

"Yeah, Richie," Eddie says with a laugh. "I've read that a million times anyway."

"Wait'll you get to the letter about the spiders in the bunk. A real creature feature."

"Ugh, gross!" "Hey, I might be Spiderman now! You never know. Stan

back yet?"

"Yeah, I'm supposed to go over in a little bit, we were gonna go to the park-- you should come too! It'd be a surprise!"

Richie grins at him, zipping up his backpack haphazardly as they set off for Stan's. "Sure thing. I'll ruin his whole quiet summer."

That smile makes it finally feel like summer.



Sonia Kaspbrak celebrates her son's return home the only way she knows how-- an 8 am doctor's appointment. He's outgrown the pediatrician, so now he's sitting by her side in a beige waiting room in an office park somewhere out in the suburbs (*But why come all the way out here? Did they run out of doctors in the city?* some unkind voice whispers at the back of his head.)

He watches the morning show on the muted TV while his mother writes out his medical history in painstaking detail on the paperwork. That honestly seems like a waste of effort to him. It's not like she won't be in there with him, providing the prologue, footnotes, works cited, and epilogue.

"Edward?"

Both he and his mother stand up, but the nurse stops Sonia from following her back into the white linoleum hallways. "One person at a time."

"I'm his mother." Eddie can barely suppress a flinch at the confusion and anger in her voice.

"He's an adult--"

"I am his *mother*--"

"Mom, it's okay. It's okay. I'll be fine." He tries to keep his voice calm long enough to get out of this unexpected escape hatch. He'll be able to do the talking. He'll be able to put his mother's story of him in the

past, where it belongs, and keep running into the future.

The door to the waiting room closes behind them, and they go through the familiar litany of the doctor's office leading up to the exam room. Eddie waits alone on the uncomfortable plastic chair, rereading the poster on the wall for the third time.

The doctor is an old man with a wrinkled lab coat and a cloud of grey hair, speaking in the kind of thick New Jersey accent Richie would love. "So. What brings you in today, Edward?"

"I... just a regular check-up, I guess. I haven't been in a while, I've been away at school."

"Oh really? What are you studying?"

"Biology. I'm pre-med."

"Wonderful," the doctor says absently: He pages through the paper chart in front of him, adjusting his glasses as he does. "Your mother expressed some concern about asthma...?"

"I had asthma when I was a kid. But it hasn't really bothered me in a couple years-- I can run now. I run almost every day," Eddie says, a note of pride in his voice.

"Great to hear," the doctor says, not sounding particularly impressed either way. He turns a page in the chart, studying it for a moment. "Okay. Family history."

Eddie only stumbles a little bit as he recites off the list-- he's spent enough time next to his mother as she rattles it off. The doctor scribbles a couple notes and moves on to the other questions. They're all standard yes or no question, nothing he even has to think about, really. Until the last one.

"And are you sexually active?"

Eddie's heart skips a beat, and he forgets for a moment how to talk. *She's going to find out. She'll see in your chart, and then... and then God knows what she'll do...*

The doctor sighs and takes off his glasses for a moment to clean them on his wrinkled lab coat. "Look, as your doctor, I'm not here to judge you. And I'm not going to tell anyone, least of all your mother. You're an adult, you have a right to privacy. I'm here to help you. But I can only do that if you're honest with me."

"I... uh... I have a boyfriend. I met him at school, my mom doesn't know."

"And do you use protection?"

"We haven't, uh... we haven't done stuff that needs it?" Eddie says, blushing furiously, looking down at the faded linoleum.

There's something oddly reassuring about the fact that the awkwardness of the whole thing doesn't seem to faze the doctor much. He goes to the drawer and pulls out a thick pamphlet with a couple embracing and smiling on the cover. After a moment's consideration, he wraps it in another, even duller pamphlet on the importance of exercise before handing it to Eddie. "For the future, then."

Eddie nods slowly, folding the pamphlet in half and sliding it into his pocket. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Now, take a deep breath for me."

The rest of the appointment goes by in a few minutes-- vitals taken with little to no comment. The doctor writes something else on the chart and closes it up. "You're in good shape, kid. You've got no concerns?"

"No. I've been really-- really good, actually. I feel good."

"Then I don't have any concerns. Get out of here," he says, with the closest thing he's had to a smile yet pulling at the corners of his mouth.

As he walks out into the waiting room, Eddie lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding.



Two days after that, there's a postcard waiting for him in the mailbox at their apartment building. He shifts it out from under the stack of bills and catalogs, stuffing it into his pocket with the pamphlet. He doesn't look at it until he's safely in his room with the door closed.

This one is a view of some picturesque section of lakeshore, all sand dunes and blue waves, the closest they can get to a real beach in that part of the country. *Wish You Were Here*, it says in neon pink block letters. Richie has drawn in a mermaid, lounging on the beach under an umbrella, twirling her hair around her fingers as she reads a book, a sea monster curled up beside her like a cat, snoozing contentedly in the sun.

Hey, Eds!

I tried to find one of our stargazing spot, but wouldn't you know it, no one made a postcard of a random road somewhere between here and Michigan. the mermaid concept was all Chrissie's idea, thank her. her and Lou say hello, by the way.

not much going on out here. just work and more work. I was so bored I actually went to the library here (didn't burst into flames, by the way, I'm as shocked as you are) it's nicer than Derry's, and the librarians don't get freaked out when you tell em your intellectual diet is mostly comic books and stuff your boyfriend tells you about science.

how's New York?

I miss you.

Richie

ps: the mermaid's name is Melissa, apparently this is vital information according to Chrissie.

Eddie traces Richie's handwriting with his fingertips, smiling to himself. He needs to go get a postcard of his own. And he's got to pick up his photos now that they've been developed.

He changes into his running clothes and slips out the door when he's

sure his mother has dozed off in front of the late afternoon talk shows, taking a steadying breath before he breaks into a run.

He spends probably more time than he should staring at the rack of random tourist friendly postcards that sit mournfully in the rack by the door of the drugstore, waiting for vacationers that don't really come to this part of town. Finally, he decides on a particularly old and dejected postcard of the Brooklyn Bridge and another one of revelers on Rockaway Beach that looks like it might have been there since his mother was a little kid. He pays for them when he picks up his photos, tucking them carefully into the bag beside the paper envelope.

He doesn't doodle on the front-- that's more Richie's department anyway. He flips over the Brooklyn Bridge one and just starts writing, right there in the store, using the ice cream freezer as a table.

Hi, Richie! (& Chrissie & Lou, of course)

Tell Chrissie that Melissa the mermaid is brilliant. The sea monster is really cute too. Does he have a name?

I'm pretty sure I took a picture of our spot last time we went up there, I just have to find it. Maybe I'll send that back next time.

It's okay. Mostly I've just been running and reading. I think I'm gonna try and get all my pictures and stuff organized. Right now they're just in a shoe box in my suitcase, it's a disaster.

What are you reading?

I miss you too. 87 days (yes I counted, fuck off, Richie)

Eddie

He drops it in the mailbox on the corner on the way home, quickly, before he can reconsider anything he's written. His mother is still asleep when he gets back, much to his relief. He goes back to his room and takes the paper envelope of pictures out of the bag and sets it down on the bed. Then he goes to his mostly unpacked suitcase and pulls out the shoe box he filled with photos and Richie's postcards.

For his high school graduation, another one of his well meaning relatives gave him an enormous photo album, bound in blue faux leather, "Class of 1994" written in cursive gilt letters across the front. The idea, he thinks, is that he was supposed to put various high school photos and mementos in there. He got as far as shoving the program from graduation in the front pocket, and that was it.

But now he pulls it off his desk, where it's sat for over a year, looking at it thoughtfully. He can use this. He can make this work.

He starts with that first photo of his dorm on move in day, sliding it into place in the clear plastic pocket. He hadn't met Richie yet, but that room still feels important. It was the first place that was really his own.

Then there's the postcards from winter break, from when they were still circling each other and trying to figure out how to say what they needed to say. The broken Street Fighter game in the lobby of the dollar theater, where they had their first date. Eddie in Richie's glasses, smiling and laughing.

Richie goofing off in the parking lot, his kitchen, anywhere and everywhere.

Richie framed by the window, looking thoughtfully out at the blizzard.

The Polaroids two of them in the mirror go together in one pocket, a diptych of the happiest night of his life.

He's piecing it all together into a story. Their story. One no one can take away from him.

He touches the Polaroids and the mermaid postcard in their pockets before he closes the book and slides it into place between his mattress and the wall, hidden out of sight.

Notes for the Chapter:

thank you as always for your supportive comments,
and also for your patience with my lateness. again,
i'm so sorry! the next chapter will also probably be

fairly short and maybe postcard focused? just because ur girl does not have a ton of time at the moment.

xoxo kitsch

14. Chapter 14

Notes for the Chapter:

suggested listening: "so far away" by Mary Lambert.

i feel really terrible for missing last week's update even though i planned a short chapter, so i'm gonna try and pull together something extra this week.

thank you so much for your patience and support!
<3

A postcard of the university's grand entrance, the one people only use for graduation day photos, its name spelled out in cast iron letters, surrounded by elaborately landscaped greenery. In the center, Richie has doodled Bigfoot, sauntering across the path.

Eddie Spaghetti, light of my life, pain in my ass,

don't expect to be too impressed-- mostly it's whatever they've got in books on tape. been listening to a ton of Agatha Christie (the little old ladies at the Thursday book club think I'm adorable.)

I'd like that, actually. it'd be nice to have. don't sweat it, though. if you can-- I don't know how it is there, but it's hot as balls here. had all the windows open in my place yesterday, until a bird got in, and I had to fight it. I won, but it was a close call.

how's your scrapbooking project going?

xo, R

ps: you counted? what a nerd.



A postcard with a colorized photograph of bathers on a beach in the 1940s. It arrives in an envelope with a photograph of a lake in late afternoon light, as seen from a truck bed on some odd little overlook.

In the left corner, slightly out of focus, is Richie, caught midlaugh.

Richie,

You really know how to make a guy feel special, huh?

It's hot here too. I run in the early morning, to try and avoid it. It only sort of works. I'm still sweaty and gross when I get back. But at least it's not like breathing soup the entire way.

I got a job helping out in the mailroom at my uncle's place. It's boring, but it gets me out of the house. And money is nice, you know?

It's going okay, although I'm sure your book club friends would give me some pointers. I like having everything together.

Eds (79 days.)

PS: Tell me more about this bird that kicked your ass.



A postcard of some old historic red brick house-- it's difficult to know which one, because Richie has drawn a massive swarm of birds that blots out the spot where the original caption was. In the foreground, he's added a small, fat sparrow wearing a soldier's helmet, its beady eyes furious. A speech bubble reads "All right men, let's get Tozier!"

Edsel the Pretzel,

been workshopping some new nicknames for you, let me know what you think.

hey, mailroom sounds like a pretty good gig, I bet you don't even have to talk to anyone! that's the dream.

what do you mean, tell you more about the bird? it was small and it had feathers and it was mad as shit at me, that's all I know. the fuck do I look like, Stan?

I got another gig too-- just temp, don't worry-- Donna's on the board for

Friends of the Animal Shelter, and she wants me to do a set at the big fundraiser thing they do every summer. I'm just getting food and some raffle tickets, but hey, more eyeballs on me.

Chrissie wants to make short films now, she's already written some scripts. I've already been cast, which is interesting, considering I haven't even read them yet. my agent is that good, I guess!

xo, R

ps: they wanna write you too, is that okay?



Richie,

Terrible, the worst one yet, it doesn't even rhyme. Try again.

I guess so. I only have to talk to the other clerk, and that's only sometimes, when I can't find something. Some days it feels like I barely talk at all, like I might forget how to. Which is dumb, but you know. I miss talking to you.

That's great about the show, though! They'll love you. Let me know how it goes. When is it?

Do I get to go to the red carpet premiere? For your movies, I mean.

Eds (68 days)

PS: That's fine! I'd really like that.



A postcard of *The Thinker* statue from below, looking down at the viewer. Richie has added a thought bubble to the clear blue sky over his head: "where the hell did I put my keys?"

Spaghetti Head (better?)

I miss hearing your voice too. I could call you, maybe? I got a phone at my place now, turns out it's way easier to get gigs if people have a way to get hold of you other than loitering outside the Mug? you'd have a chance to remember how annoying it is to hear me run my mouth.

the show's the weekend after the 4th. the other acts are a bunch of bands and a magician, so it's safe to say that I'm an A-lister now.

you doing anything for 4th of July? me and Lou and Chrissie were gonna go to the lake and camp. I've never camped in my life, so we'll see if I survive.

I would obviously love to have you on my arm for any event. we might have to make our own red carpet though, since I'm pretty sure we'll be screening these at Lou's house if we ever actually make them.

xo, R

As a postscript, Richie has written his phone number.



Richie (no,)

Sorry this took forever, I've been sick.

Not really. My uncle is having a cookout at his house, but who knows how long we'll actually go to that. Or at all-- Mom's still mad at him over something. I thought I might go to Coney Island to try and watch the fireworks. I got another camera, so I can try and get you some pictures.

I don't think that's a good idea. My mom's always around, and I'd have to call in the living room, right in front of her. And she can be such a nightmare about stuff like this, you know? I wish I could.

Not even at summer camp? I thought that was the whole point of the thing. I mean, it's called a camp.

Eds (56 days)



A postcard of a lighthouse on the lake at night. Richie has doodled a massive moth, staring quizzically at the light.

Ederick the Elder (Jesus, you're tough to please)

I don't remember going to any summer camp, but if I did, I probably would have spent the whole time hiding out in a cabin. never been an outdoor kind of person. but Chrissie and Lou are persuasive. we're leaving tonight. wish me luck!

fireworks sound cool! hopefully you can see them, I bet the ones out on Coney Island are great. Lou says we might be able to see some from the lake, but no guarantees.

any pictures you wanna send are fine by me, shutterbug.

I hope you feel better.

xo, R



A greeting card with a cartoon cat wearing sunglasses relaxing on a beach. Inside, Chrissie has written, in elegantly looping cursive:

Hi, Eddie!

How's New York? Enjoy the city lights! We promise to bring your boyfriend back in one piece. He's been dragging his feet the whole time, but he's really gotta do something other than rewrite his jokes and listen to sad songs on the radio.

lots of love,

Chrissie and Lou



There's no postcard this time, just four photos bundled together in an

envelope with a note. Three of the photos are of bright red and gold fireworks against an inky black sky. The fourth picture is of Eddie in a full length mirror, the camera held in front of his face. He's dressed in a t-shirt that hangs loose on his body and black running shorts.

Hey, Richie (absolutely not, and you're older than me, that doesn't even make sense,)

You did go once, when we were kids. You were supposed to write me then, but you forgot. So some stuff has gotten a lot better! Chrissie and Lou said they'd take care of you, and I believe in them. Just watch out for all those monsters you keep drawing for me, I guess.

I skipped the cookout. My mom did too, but I snuck out to go to the fireworks. I think I was the only person in the whole city, maybe, who wasn't drunk. Definitely the only one at the fireworks who wasn't. I used almost the whole roll of film trying to get pictures, but these three are the only ones that came out. Everything else looks like I put a bunch of Christmas lights in a blender. The one of me is so you don't forget what I look like. Obviously.

You'll be back from camping by the time you get this, so-- did you make it? Did you see any fireworks?

Eds (42 days)



A postcard from the planetarium with the constellation Ursa Minor on it. Richie has drawn a bear with a tub of popcorn, staring up at the constellation with a decidedly disgruntled expression.

Eds (guess I'll just stick to the classics, then, asshole)

I have to give you some unfortunate news-- while you used to have a boyfriend, now you mostly have a bunch of assorted mosquito bites held together with a t-shirt and sheer force of will. those citronella candles are a total scam, I think they're just aromatherapy for bugs.

glad you survived the drunks puking all over the boardwalk. we could see people setting some Roman candles and firecrackers down the beach, but

that was about all. I'm okay with that. it was kind of nice being out there in the quiet, when mosquitoes weren't trying to kill me (I guess I'm tasty?)

thanks for sending a picture where I can't see your face so I don't forget you, that really helps. you look good, though. I miss you.

my show is on Saturday. wish me luck so I don't get shown up by a magician, okay?

xo, R



Another envelope with a plain note. This one only comes with a single photo. It's Eddie, this time in a regular bathroom mirror, holding the camera away from his face and sticking out his tongue. While it may just be the lighting, it's hard not to notice the bags under his eyes, as if he hasn't been sleeping well.

Richie (yes, thank you,)

Is it at least a good t-shirt? Or is it that awful fish one? I think I still like you even as mosquito bites. Maybe. Did you put calamine on it? That's supposed to help, I think.

Taking pictures of yourself is hard! Leave me alone, Richie!

You're gonna do great! Actually, by the time you get this, you'll have done great. You can still make me laugh, and I've been listening to your bullshit since I was six.

Eds (36 days) PS: Also, try taking some allergy medicine? That can help too, especially if you're itchy.



A postcard of an amusement park along the lakeshore, a riot of neon and color against pale sand and a clear blue sky. Richie has drawn Toddzilla again, this time reaching out for the Ferris wheel in his inexorable march towards the destruction of the Midwest.

This particular postcard came in an envelope with a newspaper clipping of a photograph under the legend "Around Town." The photo is of Richie onstage with a microphone, dressed in a gray blazer and, incongruously, a t-shirt that reads "Women want me, fish fear me." The caption reads "Local funnyman Richard Tozier performed at the Friends of the Animal Shelter Benefit Saturday" before being cut off.

Eds,

good news: I did not get shown up by a magician! they actually liked me pretty well, enough to ask me back for the winter one. and I won a book of coupons for free pizza in the raffle, so this might be my best payday yet! you're gonna eat really well when you come back, that's a Richie Tozier guarantee.

I even ended up in the paper! slow news day, I guess. luckily they didn't get a picture of me tripping over the mic cord and almost eating shit in the American Legion lodge. that was my biggest laugh of the night, probably.

you look cute. you've always been cute, but it's nice to have a reminder. how'd I get so lucky?

xo, R



Richie,

Ah, Toddzilla. It's good to see you again.

Free pizza? You're really moving up in the world, Rich! I can't wait. That sounds amazing. Mom's on some weird health kick (you know, as if she's ever not on one, haha) so it's been all fish and weird salads here. I think if I ever have to look at tilapia again I'll puke.

I bought real running shoes today. They're hidden at the back of my closet, I probably won't be able to break them in until I get back to school, but my old sneakers are practically in pieces now.

My letters are probably boring you, haha. I feel like all I ever do is work and run. Sorry.

Eds (27 days)

PS: they did a decent job with your picture, even if I like the ones I take better.

PPS: Really? That's the shirt you picked? I can't believe that's the shirt I have to associate with the best night of my life.



A postcard of the clock tower in the town square, lit up for the night against the dark sky. Richie has drawn the moth from the lighthouse postcard again, now visibly annoyed.

Eds,

it's my lucky shirt! what was I supposed to do, dress like a normal person? besides, I feel like the jacket really classes it up. makes me feel like your one professor that would show up 20 minutes late and yell about Radiohead.

you're not boring me, I promise. I like hearing from you. when I get home and I see something with your handwriting on it, my whole day is just... better. like I start grinning and shit, and Lou says I get all "goosey" which is just a horrifying thing to say about anyone. makes me sound like a zit, or a peach that got left in the sun.

I like thinking about you running. you get really intense about it, and you smile a little bit, like you're proud of yourself. I like that. and you look really cute in those shorts.

plus, if you weren't keeping the countdown, I'd have no fucking idea when you were coming back.

xo, R



Richie,

Today was my last day at the mailroom. Mom wants me to take the last two weeks off to spend time with her. So I'll probably just go to a shitload of medical appointments with her. She doesn't think it's quality time unless somebody leaves with a diagnosis.

I probably sound like an asshole, don't I? I'm just tired, that's all. She thinks I'm still little and sick, like I used to be. I don't know how to show her that I'm different now.

It's not all bad, though. We're going to go upstate for a couple days before I have to leave, to do some sightseeing and stuff. I'll be just across the lake from you. For some reason, that doesn't feel as far away as here.

Eds (19 days!!!)



Richie has made his own postcard this time. It's a grainy copy of the picture Eddie sent him of their spot on the lake, glued on a clumsily cut piece of cardstock. He's drawn two figures sitting silhouetted against the sunset, leaning up against each other. In the distance, Toddzilla emerges from the lake.

Eds,

so I used to have this dream when I was a kid, where I'd help you sneak out of your house and we'd make a break for it. sometimes we hopped on trains, like I saw in old movies, or hitchhiked, or just rode our bikes until we got somewhere good, somewhere we could both just breathe. I don't know what I'm trying to say.

anytime you want to run, I'm here. I keep a bag packed at all times, you know?

I can't wait to see you, Eddie Spaghetti.

xo, R



Richie,

It's not that bad, we were just having a bad week. I didn't mean to freak you out. Things are better now.

I packed up my room today. We're leaving early tomorrow for our trip. We're going to some bed and breakfast spa thing she's read about. I'm gonna try and spend some time out taking pictures on the lake, at least.

My bus gets in at 4 pm next Saturday.

I can't wait to see you, Rich.

Eds (7 days!!!!!!!!!!)

Notes for the Chapter:

i don't know how to write epistolary stuff, but i'm having a good time anyway.

15. Chapter 15

Notes for the Chapter:

suggested listening: "arrow" by Tegan and Sara.

also, content warning: Sonia Kaspbrak, tbh.

you all have been so sweet about my delays and short chapters and everything, i wanted to give you something else for the week.

Eddie feels like he's been stuck on this bus for ages. He took out a paperback Star Trek novel to read, but it's been sitting unread in his lap since they left Pennsylvania. He keeps watching the landscape unfurl and flatten into the plains he's getting to know so well. The road signs countdown the miles to his destination,

When he sees the water tower come into view, he lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding. *You're almost home*, some part of him whispers, before he can pin it down.

He lives in a different dorm now, one across the quad from the science building. That'll make part of his life easier, at least. Even if that's way further across campus, away from the rest of town.

He can work with this.

The room is smaller and darker than his old one, down in the basement of the old building. His roommate is already there and mostly moved in, sitting on the bed. Eddie makes polite conversation as he unpacks his things and gets set up, but his mind is across town, wherever Richie is.

The last things he unpacks are his star map and the photo album. The stars on the map are already glowing faintly in the dark room, he notes with satisfaction as he climbs down from the lofted bed to examine his work.

"That's cool, man."

"Thanks," Eddie says, setting the photo album on the desk next to the rest of his books.

"I was gonna go get some food? Do you wanna come?"

"Uh... I was actually meeting a friend. But thanks for the offer," Eddie says with a smile, already walking toward the phone. As his roommate leaves, Eddie is already punching in the number he committed to memory over the summer as he tried to get the courage together to dial it.

The voice that picks up on the other end is smooth and radio ready, dropped extra low for the imaginary audience.

"Hello, caller, you're on the air with the Trashmouth, airing exclusively on 99.3, the Spirit of the Dumpster!"

"Richie?"

"Eddie Spaghetti! You're back in town!"

"I mean, you knew I was coming," he says with a little laugh:

"Shit, I know that, I just... fuck, it's good to hear your voice. I missed you."

Eddie is surprised to find himself blinking back tears, as if part of him didn't expect to hear Richie's voice again. He takes a deep breath and forces his voice to sound mostly normal. "I missed you too. Do you... do you wanna come over?"

"Hell yeah, I wanna come over, Eds. You eat yet?"

"No."

"Then I'll bring something. Where are you at now?"

"Room 133, in Mac. It's that big brick building by the science building, you can't miss it."

"Sweet. I'll see you in a little bit, okay? Bye, Eds."

"Bye," Eddie murmurs, setting the phone back in the cradle. He combs a hand through his short, wavy hair, trying to put it in some kind of order, and in the forty-five minutes it takes for Richie to get there, he opens his little closet five times, trying to decide whether he needs to change or not. In the end, he's still wearing the pair of red running shorts and white t-shirt he's been unpacking in when there's a knock at the door.

Richie is standing on the other side, dressed in jean shorts and a striped t-shirt, holding a pizza box in his arms. His hair is long enough to skim his shoulders in dark waves, and Eddie wants nothing more than to run his hands through it.

Okay, well. Actually, he wants a whole lot more than that. But in the moment, he settles for his mouth on Richie's, long, slow, sweet, like he's daydreamed about for this whole hot and restless summer.

Richie breaks the kiss, but only enough to put the pizza box aside before he puts his hands on Eddie's hips, a warm and firm weight there. "No, see, I had this whole bit I was gonna do when you opened the door--"

"I've heard your pizza guy bit before, Rich," Eddie says with a little laugh, resting his arms on Richie's shoulders. He didn't... forget, exactly, how tall Richie was, but it's different, somehow, seeing him in person after three months apart. It's like he's rediscovering how perfectly they fit together.

"No, it was totally different, promise, it was like a whole thing-- like, what if a KGB guy was undercover as a pizza delivery guy--"

"Your Russian accent sounds like the vampire guy from Sesame Street."

"Just the kind of thing a decadent American capitalist would say," Richie scoffs, sounding exactly like the Count. Eddie is almost positive he's doing it on purpose. He sits down on Eddie's desk chair and opens the pizza box with a dramatic flourish. "Bon appetit, asshole," he says, dropping back into his normal voice.

Eddie hoists himself up onto his desk to eat. He's demolished three

slices of pizza without even really thinking about it. "This is really good."

"It's pizza, it's always good," Richie laughs, resting a hand on Eddie's knee. The touch of his boyfriend's palm on his bare skin sends a flush of want into his cheeks, and Eddie quietly wills him to slide his hand upward.

He's spent most of his summer thinking and daydreaming about all the things he wants to do with Richie. That was his escape from that suffocating apartment in Queens.

Now he's here. And he wants more than he thought was even possible.

Once they've finished eating, Eddie places one of his hands over Richie's, gently guiding it up. Richie's dark brown eyes go wide behind his glasses. "Is your, uh... is your roomie around?"

"He went to go get dinner. He won't be back for a while," Eddie says, although that's more wishful thinking than anything. "C'mere."

Richie stands up and stands in front of Eddie, closing the distance between them, sliding his hands from Eddie's knees to his hips, giving them a gentle squeeze as he leans down to give Eddie a kiss. It takes Eddie no time at all to open his mouth into the kiss and wrap his legs around Richie's waist.

"You know, I kinda get the feeling you missed me," Richie breathes when they finally pull away.

"Like fucking crazy, Rich."

"Me too," he whispers back, smiling down at Eddie like there's nowhere in this world he'd rather be than here, in this tiny, dark basement dorm room with him. And that's... that's too much for Eddie to think about right now, or maybe ever, so he pulls Richie down into another kiss and tangles his fingers in his long dark hair.

Richie has just slipped a hand inside Eddie's running shorts when the key rattles in the lock, as if to remind them both why this is a bad idea. He practically jumps backwards and collapses onto the chair,

running a hand through his hair. Eddie has to fight to keep his voice casual, looking anywhere but Richie. "Oh, hey, Jason."

"Hey, Eddie. Who's this?"

Richie smiles and nods in greeting, keeping his hands in his pockets. "Hey. I'm Richie. Friend of Eddie's."

"Do you live in Mac too?"

"Nah, I'm a townie. College is for smart kids."

Jason doesn't seem to know how to react to that, other than an awkward chuckle, so he gathers his shower caddy and retreats for the bathroom. Richie watches him leave, and Eddie can't help but notice the tension knotting in his shoulders.

"He seems... nice."

"Yeah. I kinda miss having a ghost roommate already, though," Eddie says, sliding down from the desk and reaching over to rub a gentle circle at the spot between Richie's shoulder blades.

"What's your life like tomorrow?"

"Class 8 to 4:30," Eddie sighs.

"Gross. What about Friday? Got any weekend plans?"

"... you've met me, right, Rich?"

"I'd like to think so. Do you wanna come over after class?"

"Yeah, Richie. I wanna come over," Eddie says, reaching over to take Richie's hand. They sit there for a moment in the quiet before Richie speaks up again.

"I should probably head out, huh?"

Eddie nods reluctantly, even though he doesn't want Richie to go. An hour isn't enough, not after three months. But he has this much common sense left, at least. "Yeah. I gotta get up early."

"You're such a nerd," Richie says, standing up and resting a hand on Eddie's cheek, just looking into his eyes for a moment before he tilts his head and leans in for a kiss. It takes everything Eddie has to keep this kiss sweet and gentle, because he knows they don't have that kind of time.

He lingers in the doorway as Richie walks away, already missing the contact.



Eddie is eleven years old, and when people touch him, he is usually already hurting or about to hurt. Usually, it's for his own good. He clings to that, even when he wants to crawl out of his skin and away from all of this. One day, the doctors will come back with an answer for what's wrong with him, and he'll get well. No one promises him this, but he has to believe in something.

He doesn't remember what specialist he was seeing yesterday, instead of going to school. His mother keeps track of all that. He just sits quietly and does what he's told.

The first time they took blood from him, he was only seven, and his mother had to hold him for it, her arms across his chest in an iron grip. He cried then. He doesn't now. He has a system in place. When the needle goes into his skin, whenever it starts to hurt, he looks up at the ceiling, tracing new constellations in the dots on the tiles, like he's an astronaut charting new regions of the universe.

They had to take their sample out of the back of his hand today, for reasons no one bothered to explain to him. He's got two round, dark purple bruises forming there on the back of his hands, from the two attempts they had to make.

But that was yesterday. Today is a Saturday, the first one where spring feels like a real possibility and not a story they all tell each other when the snow won't stop, and he's going to see his friends.

Stan has a treehouse in his yard. Well. "Treehouse" might not be the right word, exactly. It's more like a landing for the slide attached to his swing

set, but it has a roof, and it's high off the ground, and when Stan drapes blankets to cover the open sides, it feels like their own private world.

"Stan? Richie? Are you guys up there?"

"What's the password?"

"Richie, you know it's me."

"If it's really you, you'll know the password."

"You didn't tell me any password!"

Stan calls up from the foot of the ladder, a backpack slung over his shoulder. "Richie, just let him up."

The other boy lifts the blanket and pokes his head out, grinning. "C'mon up, Eddie Spaghetti! Welcome to the party!"

Eddie rolls his eyes, but he's smiling himself as he settles inside the treehouse. It used to be a lot roomier, but the other two must be growing--now as they sit in the treehouse, Eddie is essentially sandwiched between the other two. It doesn't bother him as much as it maybe should, really. There's something kind of nice about being this close to other people while nothing is really happening. Stan distributes snacks he pilfered from his kitchen, and Richie hands out comics from his bottomless stash, all in preparation for an afternoon of companionable silence.

"What happened to your hands, Eddie?"

"Huh?"

Richie gestures to the back of Eddie's hands, his brow furrowed with worry as he takes hold of Eddie's right hand to look at it. "Your hands..."

"Oh. It's nothing. I just had some dumb tests yesterday, they had to take blood. It took them a bunch of tries."

"Jesus, are these doctors or a bunch of vampires?"

Eddie laughs. "I dunno, it's hard to tell sometimes."

“Did it hurt?”

“A little.”

Richie circles the bruise with his fingertips once, before he catches himself. For some reason, he starts to go red in his cheeks, but he doesn't look away or let go. “I'm glad you're okay, Eds.”

“Me too.” He hopes, anyway. Maybe his mother's litany of fears will stay in her head and out of his body.

They settle back into their quiet afternoon, and Eddie winds up dozing off on both of their shoulders, soothed to sleep by their furious arguments about superheroes and the steady warmth of their presence.



Eddie makes the weekly call on Tuesday mornings now, between his run and his first class. He hoped this would be one of those things that got easier with time, with a whole summer spent under her roof. It isn't.

“You were supposed to call me as soon as you got in, Eddie bear,” she says, her voice still soft even as she wields the pet name like a club.

“Mom, it was late by the time I got unpacked and set up, I didn't wanna wake you up--”

“Of course not. Why would I want to be bothered with that? I'd much rather wait to find out if my boy made it to school already, or if I'm going to hear about him on the news first--”

Eddie rubs at his temple, trying to will away the exhaustion tugging at his mind and body long enough to get through this conversation. “Mom, it's the fourth time I've made this bus trip. I was fine the other three times, and I'm fine now.”

“And it's a miracle I found out the other three times.”

He bites down on a sigh before it can escape. "I'm sorry, Mom. I'll remember next time."

The line is silent for a moment, but Eddie can see so clearly in his mind the tightness of her jaw, her knuckles white on the handset of the phone. He can feel it echoed in his own body, wound to the point of failure.

"We'll see, I suppose."

"My classes are going well so far. I'm done with gen eds, so it's just science and math now..."

She gives him half a minute to talk about his classes before it's her turn again. *The Sonia Kaspbrak Show*, he thinks bitterly, before he crams a lid on that thought. It's not like she really has anyone else to talk to.

He wishes she did. Then maybe he could finally be free.

"Hey, Mom, I have to get to class now."

"Have a good week, Eddie bear. I love you."

Eddie closes his eyes, and unbidden, he thinks of *her hands on his shoulders, nails digging into his skin through the fabric of his shirt, a vise grip he can still feel the ghost of today.*

"I love you too, Mom."

When he puts the phone back in the handset, he rests his forehead on the desk for a moment, trying to remember how to breathe steady and deep.



Halloween night 1987 is cold and rainy, and Eddie knew from the moment he woke up to the patter of raindrops on his bedroom window that there's no way he'll be allowed to go out and trick or treat.

But there's a vein of stubbornness in him, one that runs down into the

marrow of his bones, and he decides to do the thing he knows better than to do-- he argues, he pushes, he goes too far.

And that's the reason the Robin Hood costume he worked on all month is in the trash. He watched her do it, jaw clenched and spine rigid, determined not to cry.

Instead, he sat out by the living room window and watched the crowds of trick or treaters wander past, laughing and smiling. He stays until the last porch light gives up on waiting for last minute stragglers and goes out. Then he finally retreats to his room, lying in his bed and looking up at the faint glow of the stars on his poster.

He's almost asleep when he hears the faint tap of a pebble against the glass of his window. When he sits up and looks out the window, his heart stops for a moment as he sees a stranger in a mask standing in his yard.

Then the figure lifts up the cheap plastic werewolf mask, and he recognizes Richie. He slowly, carefully slides the window up and whispers out into the night. "Richie? What are you doing here?"

"I came to check on you! I figured you didn't mean to ditch me, right?"

"My mom wouldn't let me go out. She said it was too cold, even though I said I'd wear a coat."

"That's dumb! I'm sorry, Eddie Spaghetti."

"Not your fault," he says, almost too quiet to hear. "Shouldn't you go home? It's gross out, and your mom'll be mad if you're out too late..."

"I told her I had to make a special delivery," Richie says, holding out a second pillowcase full of candy. "I told everyone that I was collecting candy for my buddy who couldn't make it. Here," he says, tossing the bag up towards Eddie, who barely manages to catch it as it comes through the open window.

He feels the weight of the bag in his arms, and he realizes that Richie carried this around all night, that he had to have hit almost every neighborhood in Derry in order to get this much. After everything else that's happened today, for some reason, it's the weight of all this sugar and cellophane that makes him want to cry. "Richie, you didn't have to..."

"Don't sweat it, Eds. I was gonna try and pull the same scam whether you came with me or not," he says with a crooked grin, winking at him. Eddie can feel a blush creeping into his cheeks, a flutter in his stomach, and he wonders for a moment what that's all about. It's just Richie being Richie, probably.

For one wild, impossible moment, Eddie imagines flinging the sack of candy over his shoulder and climbing out his window and down to Richie, the two of them running out into the night to leave Derry behind and live on sugar and dreams while they figure out where they really belong. For just that moment, escape seems like a real possibility.

But dreams like that never last long, and he sets the bag back back down and leans on the windowsill. "Thanks, Richie. I gotta go. We might wake up my mom." And that... that doesn't really bear thinking about.

"And my mom'll flip if I'm not home soon," Richie sighs, pulling the wolf mask back down over his face. "See ya later, Eddie Spaghetti."

Eddie closes the window and watches the other boy go down the dark and rainy street and disappear around the corner. He unwraps a single piece of chocolate and lets it melt in his mouth. He wonders if escape would taste like chocolate and the cold, rainy night air.

Notes for the Chapter:

do u ever think about all the losers trick or treating together and just weep very gently

16. Chapter 16

Notes for the Chapter:

suggested listening: "fallingforyou" by the 1975.

alternate scenes? what alternate scenes? u must be mistaken.

anyway i'm suing billiam hader and anderson musichetti for emotional damages, who's with me?

Richie can't stop smiling. He hasn't been able to since he heard Eddie's voice on the phone. Even here at the diner, in the middle of a mad rush of sloppy new drunks, he can't stop humming to himself as he tosses together hamburgers and home fries.

"Wow, I can see what you mean about the gooey face," Chrissie says, leaning her head on Lou's shoulder as she watches him over the smeary plexiglass partition between the grill and the booths in the back.

"Nah, that's just grease, baby. If you think your burger feels a little dry, I can just wring out my hair on it. Or if you're still having trouble with that rusted out chain on your bike--"

"Disgusting as always, thank you, Richie."

"Beats the hell out of WD40, that's for sure!"

"I'd ask if you got to see him yet, but you're humming Belinda Carlisle instead of the Cure, so I think I have my answer."

"Fuck off, Lou," he says aimiably, flipping a burger on the grill. "Yeah, I got to see him for a little bit yesterday. He actually has a roommate now, but hey, we've got my place."

"So we won't see you on my doorstep this weekend."

"That is correct, maestro. We've got plans."

Lou rolls her eyes. "So what's your plan?"

Richie pauses, almost dropping the plate he's supposed to be passing over to the server. "Uh... he's coming over, and that's as far as I got."

Chrissie sighs, twirling a French fry through the pool of ketchup on Lou's plate. "Hopeless."

"Yeah, seriously, dude."

"Everyone's a fuckin' critic," Richie groans. "I thought maybe I'd make him a nice dinner? Since his mom's been on this whole 'healthy food only' bullshit all summer."

"Kinda scared of what you think is a nice dinner, since I've seen you put marshmallow fluff on a saltine and eat it."

"Fuck you, that was *one time*, and I was stoned outta my fuckin' mind, no thanks to you two--"

"You're welcome," Chrissie says in a singsong voice. "I don't think that's a bad start, honestly. You can wine him, dine him--"

"Don't," Richie laughs, shaking his head quickly. "I was thinking maybe... lasagna? That was okay when I made it for you guys, right?"

"It was fucking phenomenal, Richie. Any way you could make a double batch?"

"We'll see."

"Are you bringing Eddie next weekend?"

"... to what?"

Chrissie sighs again. "The *movie*, Richie! We're shooting the movie? The thing you're playing the lead in?"

"Oh, right."

"Honestly, you're such a space cadet sometimes, Richie."

"It's part of my charm," Richie shrugs. "I mean, I can ask him? He might be busy with school, though."

"By the second week?"

"Hey, man, pre-med is wild. He's doing like, science shit now. But I'll ask."

Chrissie grins at him and drops her voice into a conspiratorial stage whisper. "You should ask to borrow some of his running shorts."

"... why?"

"Costuming! Obviously!"

"Are you ever gonna show me the script for this thing? Or... tell me what it's about? Anything?"

Chrissie lights up like a neon sign, clapping her hands together. Lou smiles over at her, soft and admiring, her cheek leaned on her hand as she watches her girlfriend bubble over with excitement. "Okay, so, after you made me watch all those horror movies, I started thinking... what if I made my own? Like a slasher, but with my own twist, you know?"

"Sounds cool. So what's your twist?"

Chrissie starts counting off on her fingers. "Well, I wanna shoot part of it, maybe even most of it, from the killer's point of view--"

"Like the first Halloween, right? When Michael Myers is a kid?"

"Okay, but instead of a final girl, my protagonist is gonna be a final boy!"

"Like in the second Nightmare on Elm Street? You know, Freddy's Revenge, that whole thing?"

Chrissie scowls. "And the killer's gonna be a girl!"

"That's... the first Friday the 13th, right, Lou?"

“Yeah, that's right.”

Chrissie rolls her eyes and swipes more fries off of Lou's plate. “You guys are a bunch of nerds. I'm gonna stuff you in a locker. Anyway, I'll get you a copy of the script later this week. It all depends on when I can sneak into the hall director's office to use the copier. Speaking of which... duty calls,” she says, leaning in for a quick kiss before sliding out of the booth. “Gotta go sit behind a desk for a couple hours. See you, babe. Catch you later, Richie.”

“See you, Chrissie.”

Lou watches her as she leaves, a fond smile on her lips. “She loves being an RA. I kind of hate it. It's the desk shifts that are the worst, you know? Cause they're all at weird times... and then there's all the meetings...”

Richie slides her another order of fries in a to go bag. It's the best way he has to commiserate. “Sorry, man.”

“No, it's fine. I'm just whining. At least she got to come back early, you know? Instead of just visiting.” She stretches and starts to get up out of the booth. “I'd better head out too. Gotta go help out the closers at work. Have a good night, okay, man?”

“You too,” he calls after her. He goes through the motions of his shift, but his mind is far away, trying to make a plan for Friday, to make it the kind of night Eddie deserves.



Eddie is sick again, and even with Stan at his side, he feels adrift. It's spring break, and they should be out doing something fun, but they just keep riding their bikes in big, lazy loops around Derry. Their loops always manage to find their way past the Kaspbraks' house, where Richie tries to see past the dark windows and drawn shades for any sign of life. Stan is nice enough to say anything about it.

The first three times, anyway. The fourth time, he stops his bike in front of their driveway, waiting for Richie. “Why don't we just go knock on the door?”

"Nah, that's not a good idea."

"Why?"

"His mom's not... a big fan of me." He still remembers the stinging rebuke of Eddie's absence at his eighth birthday, and it's hard to miss the way she looks at him like an ill-behaved animal when she lets him come around. Sometimes he wishes he knew what he did, so that he could say sorry. But a part of him is worried that the answer might be "exist," and he doesn't know how to begin apologizing for that. He's tried. He'll spend far too much of his life apologizing for that, before he realizes.

"I could ask."

"She might let you in. But me... not a chance."

Stan sighs. "Then can I at least go?"

"... sure, Stan. I'll... go around the corner, I guess. Tell him I said hi, okay?"

He smiles and nods as he walks up the steps. "Of course I will, Richie."

Richie watches from around the corner, mostly hidden by the overgrown bushes. Sonia Kaspbrak lets Stan in, but only for a few minutes. She ushers him out a few minutes later, lips pressed into a thin, disapproving line. And that's... that's weird. Adults love Stan. They call him "an old soul" and give him special jobs and ask him for his opinion and actually listen when he gives it. They don't look at him the same way as Richie.

"How is he?" Richie blurts out as soon as Stan comes into view. He doesn't like the worried line between his eyebrows, or the confusion in his eyes.

"He was... tired, I think. He wasn't really awake. He asked about you."

Richie stops in his tracks, almost falling off his bike. He barely brings the kickstand down in time. "What?"

"He wanted to see you too. But his mom came in, and she said he had to take some medicine and..." Stan's voice trails off.

“Stanley?”

“It doesn't... it doesn't feel right. It feels bad, the way she talks to him. You know?”

Richie nods solemnly, a sick lump in the pit of his stomach. He thinks, not for the first time or the last time, of the witch from Hansel and Gretel, clutching the key to that cage in her fist. “Yeah.”

“I don't like that house.”

“Me either.”

“I told him he could come over as soon as he felt better. He said he would. That's when his mom came in.”

“We should tell someone.”

Stan looks at him. “Who?”

Richie has no answer for that. He doesn't know who in Derry they could tell about is. Everyone's eyes slide so easily over the bad and the unspeakable here, as if it will go away if no one acknowledges it. An uneasy silence falls between the two of them, and this time, on their loop, they stop in the Barrens, throwing rocks into the river to hear the splashes break the quiet.



Richie has all the windows open and the radio blasting, and he's stripped down to a tank top and jeans as he cooks. Maybe lasagna wasn't the best idea for a night like this, where summer makes it clear that it has no intention of giving up its death grip on the year. He finally finishes his task and sits on the floor in front of the couch, leaning his head back.

He can barely hold back a grin as he hears Eddie coming up the stairs. “Door's open, Eds.”

“Did you die or something?” Eddie says, leaning against the wall and looking at him with one eyebrow arched up.

"Hey, man, it's cooler down here. Hot air rises and cold air sinks. That's science, baby."

"You know, that's actually right. I'm impressed."

"I did go to some of my classes before I dropped out, you know. C'mere, Spaghetti Head," Richie says, patting the floor beside him.

"Pretty sure I rejected that one," Eddie says, taking a few steps forward before dropping his backpack onto the desk Richie made for him.

"You did. I thought it might sound better out loud?"

"It doesn't," Eddie says with a laugh, settling onto the bed like he belongs there. He props himself up on his elbows after a moment, tilting his head. "You come here," he says, voice clear, a smile on his lips. And, really, what choice does Richie have but to go?

He sits down on the bed beside Eddie, leaning over to kiss his cheek. "Hey, Eds."

Eddie turns his head to kiss him properly, a hand at the back of his neck. "Hey," he says, smiling as his fingers stroke gently through Richie's dark curls. And that-- that contact does something to Richie, overloads the parts of his brain that handle things like "Normal Polite Conversation" and "How to Be A Person." It takes him a second to remember what he should probably say. "So how was your day?"

"Boring," Eddie sighs, lying back down. His fingers are still working through Richie's hair, and Richie rolls over onto his stomach to make that a little easier. "Syllabus week always is. But we'll move on to the real stuff soon, hopefully. How about you?"

"I worked, saw Chrissie and Lou a couple times, wrote a bunch of jokes and shit, the usual. Got to see somebody I've been missing for a while, that was kinda nice."

Eddie smiles at him, and it makes something flutter out of rhythm deep in Richie's chest. "Yeah? Are they cute?"

"He's really cute, yeah. He's got these gorgeous brown eyes, and a

smile that could light up this whole town, and he looks really good in a pair of shorts, makes my day every time I see him.”

“Oh, should I leave before he gets here?” Eddie says, grinning as he sits up like he's going to get out of the bed. Richie winds his arms around Eddie's waist, pulling him against his chest.

“Don't even think about it, Eds,” he says, pressing a kiss to his forehead. Eddie's hands are at his chest, and they slide upwards, coming to rest in Richie's hair, tugging him gently into a kiss. Richie can feel his lips curving into a smile.

He squeezes Eddie's hips, then trails one of his hands downward, over his ass and along the back of his thigh, and Eddie opens his mouth into the kiss, rolling them over so he's on his back, Richie on top of him. He rocks his hips upward, and Richie lets out a low groan.

“Eds, baby...”

“I missed you too,” he says, his voice low and soft as he pulls at Richie's shirt, yanking it over his head and off. Richie kisses down along Eddie's jawline and his throat, breathing deep as he pushes Eddie's shirt up and trails his lips down his chest and stomach. He can't hold back a smile at the sharp gasp Eddie makes, and he lingers there for a moment, pressing kisses up and down the trail of dark hair that starts at his belly button and disappears into his waistband.

His hands go back to Eddie's hips, and Eddie starts to lift his hips obligingly. But Richie slides his hands downward again, along the inside of Eddie's thighs, following the seam of his jeans. Eddie moves restlessly, and there's the faintest trace of a whine in his voice. “Richie...”

“No running shorts today, huh?”

“I really don't think I wear those as often as you think I do, Richie.”

“Yeah, but you look so good in em, baby,” he whispers, undoing the button and dragging the zipper down. “Loved that picture you sent me. Thought about it a lot,” he says, pulling Eddie's jeans down and free. He folds them haphazardly and drapes them over the foot of the

bed before settling back down between Eddie's legs. He can see that Eddie's half-hard already, and his cheeks are flushed. He rests a hand on Eddie's knee, then presses his lips to Eddie's inner thigh. The skin there is soft, smells faintly of sweat and laundry detergent and Eddie. "Thought about doing this the next time I saw you," he murmurs between kisses, his other hand stroking up and down the front of Eddie's boxers.

Eddie lets out a low moan, and that-- that does something to Richie, overrides all the parts of Richie's brain that handle shit like impulse control and common sense. Before he can catch himself, he's sucking a mark into Eddie's inner thigh, using his teeth like he's a goddamn vampire or something.

The sound Eddie makes in response is sharp and wordless, almost pained, and Richie panics, lifting his head from Eddie's thigh. "Shit, shit, sorry, I-- you okay, Eddie?"

Eddie just nods and pulls Richie into another kiss, this one rougher than before, radiating sheer want. It could burn him up, how much Eddie wants him, and Richie doesn't care if that happens, as long as he stays close enough.

"Don't be sorry, Richie, I--I really liked that," he says, tangling his fingers in Richie's hair again.

"Yeah?"

"Uh huh. I want... more," he says, and Richie really has to commit to memory the way his freckles stand out against the soft red flush of his cheeks. It's too beautiful, too perfect, the kind of thing he doesn't deserve. He'll give Eddie anything he wants, everything he can.

"What do you want, baby," Richie murmurs, pressing a kiss to the hollow of Eddie's throat, closing his eyes for a moment as he breathes in deep. Then he glances up, watching Eddie.

His boyfriend's dark eyes are half-closed, and he's biting his lip as he considers the question. Richie keeps trailing kisses down Eddie's body as he gives him time to think, like he's trying to learn him by heart this way.

"Can you suck my dick?" Eddie blurts out, just as Richie presses his lips to the mark he'd left on Eddie's thigh a few moments earlier. Eddie bites his lower lip again, glancing away, almost like he's nervous or embarrassed. Richie must be quiet for a second too long, because Eddie starts talking again, in that too fast way he gets sometimes. "You don't-- you don't have to, I just--"

"Anything you want, sweetheart," Richie says softly, hooking his fingers in the waistband of Eddie's boxers. He has no idea what he's doing, but for Eddie, he'll try anything.

He strokes his palm over Eddie's length a few times, taking deep, steadying breaths as he tries to plan out how he's going to do this. He wraps his hand along the base of Eddie's dick, then slowly drags his tongue along the underside. It's a new taste, but he finds that he likes it. Eddie moans again, low and deep, and there's something so gorgeous in that sound. Richie wants to hang onto that sound forever.

He tries to take too much the first time, because Richard W. Tozier is nothing if not massively over ambitious, and winds up almost choking, but he recovers admirably, bobbing his head over Eddie's dick in a steadier, more reasonable rhythm. He must be doing something right, because Eddie moans his name and digs his heels into the mattress, trying to find some kind of purchase and keep his hips still.

Richie tries to take him deep again, and this time he's more successful. Eddie gasps and tugs at his hair hard, and that-- holy shit, that's a sensation Richie didn't know he *needed* like this. He's harder than he's ever been in his life.

"Richie," Eddie moans, desperate and needy. Richie hums softly around Eddie's dick, a low and pleased sound.

"Richie, please... Richie, I'm gonna..." Eddie whispers, before his voice trails off into a beautiful, wordless moan.

By the time it occurs to Richie what that might mean, Eddie is rocking his hips up into Richie's mouth, tugging at his hair again, and Richie sputters a little before he swallows as best as he can. It's not really a bad taste, he thinks briefly, faintly surprised at that. He can

worry about that later if he has to, he guesses. He pulls away and wipes at the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand before he rests his head on Eddie's thigh, gazing up at him. Eddie's eyes are closed, and he's breathing hard, but he's smiling, soft and warm, like he's really content. Richie wonders, not for the first time, what the fuck he did to get so stupidly lucky.

Eddie's hand is still in Richie's hair, his nails scratching gently at his scalp, and Richie lets out a soft, pleased noise at that. He kisses the inside of his thigh again, still smiling.

They lie there on the bed for a few minutes, happily tangled up together in the summer heat, when Eddie speaks up.

"Hey, Rich?"

"Yeah, sweetheart?"

"Is something burning?"

Because nothing will ever have a greater sense of humor than the inscrutable universe, the smoke alarm chooses that exact moment to begin shrieking. "Oh, fuck me sideways," Richie groans, scrambling out of bed and running to the kitchen, which is now beginning to fill with gray smoke pouring from oven. He fumbles for his mismatched oven mitts and opens the oven. He releases more, thicker smoke, and the tragic remains of his lasagna.

"Goddammit," he mutters, popping out the screen of the kitchen window so he can set the smoking casserole dish on the sill. Eddie's in the kitchen, his boxers pulled haphazardly over his hips, and he has the collar of his shirt pulled over his nose, and he's waving one of his notebooks in the air, trying to wave the smoke away from the alarm to no avail.

Richie props the door open in an attempt to get some more air circulating, and he climbs on a chair to get at the smoke detector, trying to futz around with it until it stops shrieking. Finally, he manages to hit the right button somewhere, and the room is mercifully silent. He stays there on the chair, surveying the domain of this truly catastrophic fuck up.

“Well. At least I know my smoke alarm works.”

Eddie is sitting on the floor, pulling his shirt away from his face as the smoke finally begins to clear. “Richie, what happened?”

Richie gestures to the blackened surface of the lasagna, which resembles a pockmarked, burned over battlefield on an alien planet far more than any known edible food item. “Dinner is served.”

A smile slowly spreads over Eddie’s face, even as he tries to hide it behind his hand. “Oh, Richie...” he says, and anyone could see the way his shoulders are shaking with barely suppressed laughter. It makes Richie want to kiss him again (*but then again, what doesn't, these days?*)

“Shut up,” Richie says, barely holding back his own smile. And that's the end of it for Eddie. He breaks into gales of laughter, the kind that leaves his whole body heaving and helpless, the kind that rattles all the window panes and every atom of Richie's being. He's clutching at his sides, tears rolling down his cheeks. Once he really gets going, he's not even really making sounds, just a goofy clicking sound at the back of his throat. Richie gets down on the floor and slings an arm around Eddie's narrow shoulders, tousling his hair. “Yeah, you're real fuckin' funny, Eds, huh? Just a real funny guy,” he says, voice full of mock exasperation, which only sets Eddie off more.

He winds up flopped over with his head in Richie's lap, still giggling to himself. Richie waits until he's finally calmed down to speak up. “So... pizza?” “Sounds like a plan,” Eddie says, biting his lip. Richie watches him carefully, trying to determine if he's going to lose his shit again. “You're gonna have to get off me for that, you know.”

“Hmmm... debatable,” Eddie replies, closing his eyes and making himself even more comfortable.

“It's really not. I need my legs. Phone's over there, you know?”

Eddie gets up, but not without a truly dramatic pout. He helps Richie to his feet, then follows him to the couch, dropping down with his head on Richie's shoulder as he dials the pizza place.

Because the universe is a place of vast and unfathomable cruelty, Lou is the one who answers the phone. "Hi, thanks for calling the Pizza Palace. Delivery or pickup?"

Richie rubs at his temple, briefly considering doing a voice other than his own. But that would only make the two of them laugh harder, probably. "Uh, delivery."

"... Richie?"

He rolls his eyes up at the ceiling, determined not to look at Eddie. "Hey, Lou."

"What happened to the whole 'make him a dinner from scratch' plan, buddy?"

"I don't... we don't need to talk about that right now." And that's it, Eddie's off again, like he never stopped, giggling into Richie's ear. "Oh for fuck's sake," he sighs, as Lou cackles down the line, trying to call to Eddie. "Eddie, what happened--"

"Don't start, Jesus, he's not gonna be coherent for like, another twenty minutes at this rate."

"That good, huh?"

"I hate you."

Richie can already see the smirk on her face, and he drags a hand through his hair. "So I'll bring you your usual, then?"

"Yeah, that sounds good."

"Jesus, he's still going." "I wasn't kidding. Earlier he was melting down on my kitchen floor."

"All right. See you in a bit, Julia Child."

"Oh, fuck off," Richie says with a laughing sigh, hanging up the phone. Then he grabs Eddie, still laughing into his shoulder, and presses kiss after kiss along his cheek, his neck, his shoulder, thinking with each one, *I love you, I love you, god help me, I love you.*

In that moment, it doesn't occur to him to be scared of that feeling.

Notes for the Chapter:

alternate titles for this chapter: "Richie Tozier Learns About The Importance of A Kitchen Timer."

i'm so close to winter break i can taste it!!

some housekeeping stuff, i guess-- i've figured out where i want the overarching plot of this fic to go, so i'll start wrapping this part of it soon. i say "part," because this thing wants to be... a series? how did this happen? why am i like this?

anyway, much love as always for your patience and support. you guys rule. <3

17. Chapter 17

Notes for the Chapter:

suggested listening: "demons" by hayley kiyoko.

hi, friends. sorry for missing last week's update-- i thought i would have time through the holiday, but life had other plans. i'm almost done with this semester, and i am really, really REALLY excited to have some time to focus on this.

also, content warning for Sonia Kaspbrak's specific brand of medical child abuse in the flashbacks.

Eddie Kaspbrak isn't sure that he's ever been this happy. Sometimes he catches glimpses of it in his memories, little moments going off like firecrackers and echoing into now. But the present lasts, gives off warm and flickering light like a campfire, the kind he feels like he can read a real future in.

Which really begs the question-- why does he feel so fucking bad?

It feels like his whole body is stretched tight, humming with tension in the half-second before it snaps and sends him to pieces. Something feels *wrong*, the kind of wrong he doesn't know how to fix, the kind of wrong that ruins everything. He wakes up in the morning and his jaw aches like he's been clenching it all night. Like he's holding something back.

He's only supposed to feel like this at the apartment back in Queens. He's not supposed to feel like this here. He's supposed to be free.

He goes to the student health center, rattles off his symptoms in one hurried breath, like he's running out of air.

The doctor doesn't find anything. She seems thoughtful as she writes out a referral to the counseling center and gently presses it into his hand. "A lot of students report stress like this, especially as their course load increases. They do great work. I'd recommend getting in

touch with them.”

Eddie shoves the piece of paper in his coat pocket and leaves the exam room, his jaw clenched tight again. This *cannot* just be in his head. It can't. Because... because...

(if this was, what if it all was?)

... well, the alternative really doesn't bear thinking about. He remembers his mother storming out of some specialist's office or other, muttering to herself, *better sick than crazy*, and she said it like an immutable truth of the universe. Challenging it makes less sense than trying to argue against the law of gravity.

If he can't fix it, he'll try to outrun it. It can't catch him when his body is utterly exhausted, all leaden limbs and clumsy thoughts, hitting the pillow and flipping off like a light switch.

It can still catch him at Richie's place, but it can't seem to get its claws in for keeps there. There's always the soft music of the radio, Richie's chatter, the rustle of comic book pages. When he wakes up from some half-remembered nightmare, breathing hard and aching for stillness and safety, Richie pulls him close against his chest without even fully waking, resting his head on Eddie's, wrapped around him like he's shielding him from the world.

On those nights, Eddie lies awake with his eyes closed, counting Richie's heartbeat until he can follow him back down into sleep.

This afternoon, Lou's truck is parked outside the apartment. He's not sure what he's expecting, but it's definitely not a massive pile of recording equipment just inside the door, or Chrissie using Richie's kitchen table as a makeup table.

“Okay, and I need makeup because...?”

“Because otherwise you're gonna look like a weird, shiny ghost on camera. And that's not what I want. Hold still.”

“I *am* still!”

Lou looks up from the camcorder she's holding and waves at Eddie.

“Hey, man!”

Richie’s eyes fly open, and he scrambles off the chair before Chrissie can protest. He’s got three different colors of foundation swatched on his cheek, none of which match, and his hair is awkwardly pulled into a tiny ponytail to keep it out of his face while Chrissie works. He looks, honestly, completely ridiculous. But that doesn’t matter. His face lights up with that bright, goofy smile that Eddie likes to imagine is reserved just for him. “Eds! Shit, I forgot you were coming--”

“I come over every weekend, Richie.”

“Wait, you didn’t ask him to come with us?”

Eddie frowns. “Come with you where?”

Chrissie whirls on Richie, who’s suddenly doing a really admirable impression of a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming semi. “Really, Richie?”

“... I forgot-- look, I’ll tell him now. So this weekend, we’re going out to the lake, to shoot Chrissie’s movie. We were gonna camp there, and make it like a whole thing. Do you... wanna come?”

“I don’t have to be in it, right?”

Chrissie pipes up. “You could! But you don’t have to.”

“Then I’ll come.”

Chrissie pulls him into a hug. “It’s gonna be so much fun! Also, did you bring your running shorts? We’re gonna need them for Richie’s costume.”

Eddie tilts his head in confusion, but he flashes the other three a bemused smile. “Uh. Sure. When do we leave?”

“Right now! Come on, let’s go,” Chrissie says, grabbing his backpack and tossing it to him. “Dibs on shotgun.” Lou follows her, still holding the camcorder. Richie smiles to himself and goes to gather up the bags of equipment. Eddie stops him just long enough to pull him

into a kiss, his fingers at the back of Richie's neck.

"I'm a terrible boyfriend, I'm sorry--"

"You're really not, Rich," Eddie murmurs, pressing another kiss to Richie's cheek. "Did you guys remember to pack bug spray this time?"

"... shit."

Eddie laughs, shaking his head. Then one of the girls starts laying on the horn outside. "I left some here, in your first aid kit."

"I have a first aid kit?"

Eddie rolls his eyes. "Here," he says, handing Richie the one bag of equipment he picked up. "I'll be out in a second, okay?"

He emerges from the apartment a few minutes later, as Lou and Chrissie are loading the last bags into the bed of the truck. He climbs over the center console and awkwardly gets in one of the tiny seats back there, balancing the first aid kit on his knees.

"Pretty roomy back here," he says, looking over at Richie in the other seat, one eyebrow arched up.

"I feel like a fuckin' origami frog," his boyfriend mutters, folding his arms across his chest and scowling. He can't maintain that scowl when Eddie reaches out and takes his hand.



Over the summer they turned eleven, Richie got tall, and Eddie can't stop staring. They used to be eye level, but now Eddie has to lift his head slightly to meet the other boy's eyes now, and something about that is... it's just different, in a way Eddie can't put his finger on.

Richie, being Richie, can't help but lord it over Stan and Eddie. He makes a big show of reaching for stuff on the higher shelves, and on more than one occasion, rests his gangly arms and pointy elbows on their shoulders and asks, "how's the weather down there, half pint?"

Eddie groans whenever he does it, but he doesn't actually hate it. There's something nice and comforting about the weight and warmth of Richie's arms on his shoulders, and the way Richie does it like a joke makes it safer, somehow. People don't see it as something they have to correct or punish.

It gets on Stan's nerves, especially today, in the oppressive late August heat. "Get your sweaty noodle arms off me," he complains, ducking out from under Richie. .

"Noodle arms?" I could suplex you into the ground, Stanley--"

"You got taller, it doesn't mean you got any stronger!"

Richie grins, in that way he does when he's about to give in to one of his wonderful bad ideas. "Wanna bet?" he says, before tackling Stanley.

"Get off me, Richie, it's too hot!"

"Hold still--"

"Eddie, help me!"

Eddie freezes for a moment, then launches himself into the fray, grabbing around Richie's waist and tugging backwards with all his might. He lets out a triumphant little whoop when the other boy collapses on top of him, just before he hits the ground and gets the wind knocked out of him.

For one moment, he has the crazy, stupid, fleeting thought that this must be what people mean when they say "he takes my breath away."

Then he struggles to breathe in, and he fumbles for the inhaler in his pocket, pressing down the button and releasing the bitter medicine.

"Shit, sorry, Eddie," Richie says, reaching over to smooth over Eddie's tousled hair. It's an unfamiliar gesture for them. But he doesn't hate it.

The part that he hates comes after, when the screen door slams and his mother comes to drag him back inside, back into the cold stillness of that house.

In the second before the door closes, Eddie twists around and sees Richie,

still sitting in the middle of his lawn, frozen in place, reaching out for him.



They have their tent set up on the dunes, looking out over the lake. Eddie got out one of his textbooks and opened it up, like he was going to start his reading for the week, but he ends up looking out at the water instead. It seems to stretch on forever, the waves rolling in and out as easy as everyone else's breathing. It all flows together, part of the same untroubled infinite.

It's probably at least a little weird to envy a body of water, right?

"Okay, Eddie, you gotta promise not to laugh at me."

Eddie looks over his shoulder, brow furrowed. That's not something Richie would ask for. He's always lived for any laugh he can get, no matter what it takes. "Richie, what..."

His voice trails off as the sight of Richie finally registers with him. He's wearing a white tank top, one that Chrissie has painstakingly painted with the slogan "CAMP SUNSHINE," and a pair of Eddie's red running shorts. And... the thing is, those are already a little too short on Eddie. On Richie, they've moved into a strange no man's land between a pair of shorts and a Speedo. Topping off the whole ensemble is a red and white headband fighting a cold war with Richie's unruly curls.

Richie closes his eyes, rubbing at his temple. "Just say it. I promise, it's not any worse than anything I've said to myself."

"So... are you supposed to be a lifeguard or an extra on one of my mom's aerobics tapes?"

"Chrissie! I 'm not wearing this fucking thing!"

"You look fine. Eddie, tell him he looks fine," Chrissie says, coming out of the tent and brandishing a makeup brush.

Eddie doesn't say anything, just gets up from the blanket he's sitting on and goes to kiss Richie on the cheek, sliding the headband free.

“The headband’s too much, Chrissie. It looks better without it.”

She opens her mouth to argue, then stops. “Okay. Fine. Everything else stays.”

“I look fuckin’ absurd.”

“Maybe that’s the point! Hey, Eddie, you wanna be a dead person?”

“... what?”

She waves him over. “You’re gonna lay half in, half out of the water, and Richie’s gonna find you. Then I’ll chase him.”

“I don’t know... I’m not really into acting or anything...”

“You’re just gonna play dead for like... ten minutes. Here, put this shirt on.”

When she starts pouring fake blood on him, Eddie has the distinct feeling that none of them actually know what they’re doing. But they’re having fun.

The water is cooler than he expects, but he likes the feeling. For a moment, he imagines being part of the lake water. Which is goofy as shit, but it works. Particularly as the ten minutes of playing dead turns into forty as Chrissie does take after take.

They’ve barely started the chase scene when it starts to rain, the kind of long, hard rain you only get in summer storms. The four of them shelter in the tent, but when it becomes clear that the rain won’t be letting up any time soon, Chrissie and Lou go back into town to get food.

Eddie is looking out at the lake again when Richie winds an arm around his shoulder. “You know, I think we’re done shooting for the day. You don’t have to stay in that whole... horrifying ketchup accident get up.”

Eddie pulls the shirt away from his chest, smirking at Richie. “I don’t know, I really think red is my color.”

“Nah. Not this time,” Richie says, his voice going a little quiet before he presses a kiss to the top of Eddie’s head. “Aren’t you cold? You were in the water a while.”

Eddie shakes his head and then shrugs out of the faux bloody shirt. “Not really.”

“Well, you feel cold,” Richie says, running his palm along Eddie’s lower arm. His palms are rough, callused, but still so gentle. Eddie doesn’t know what to do with the care in that gesture, or the way some small part of him wants to run away from it. So he goes to his backpack and digs out a sweatshirt, haphazardly pulling it on before climbing into Richie’s lap.

“Warm me up, then.”

Richie pulls one of the blankets around them both before resting his hands at the small of Eddie’s back, smiling up at him. “Better?”

Eddie closes his eyes, lets himself breathe in deep the steady rhythm of the rain and the warmth of Richie, nods slowly.

That tightness in his chest doesn’t go away, but in this moment, it doesn’t feel like it’s strangling him.



Eddie is ticklish. It's not a secret, exactly, but Richie is the only one who knows. Which makes sense, of course, since he's the one who finds out about it. They're goofing off in Richie's basement, fighting over the last Snickers bar in a stash of Halloween candy Richie had hidden and forgotten about.

“Finders keepers, Richie!”

“It’s my candy, Eddie, come on--”

“Yeah, but I found it,” Eddie says, holding the candy bar up and out of Richie’s reach.

“Do you even like Snickers?”

Eddie pauses, genuinely considering the question. "I don't know, I don't think I've ever--"

Before he can finish his sentence, the other boy is pinning him to the couch, grabbing for the candy. Eddie hides it in his shirt, confident that he won't go for it there.

And he doesn't, but what he does instead is both better and worse. He runs his fingers along Eddie's side, on the bare where his shirt has ridden up in the struggle.

It's such a small, gentle thing to send him into a paroxysm of laughter like this. He tries half-heartedly to squirm away, but he's still laughing, and there's nowhere to go but off the couch and onto the hard concrete floor, and anyway, he's not sure he wants to go anyway. He'd much rather stay here, laughing with Richie.

It's nice for someone to touch him without hurting him.

The candy bar falls out of his shirt and onto the ground in their laughter, and Richie snatches it up. Eddie doesn't even care, really, too busy laughing and trying to catch his breath.

Richie unwraps it and then carefully tears it in half, offering it to Eddie. "Since you've never had one before," he says, looking away for a moment, his cheeks bright red.

"Thanks, Richie."

He takes one bite and carefully chews it over for a moment before handing it back to Richie. The other boy lets out a disgusted sigh. "See, I knew it, you don't even fuckin' like peanuts," he says, before shoving the rest of the candy bar into his mouth.

"You're gross, Richie," Eddie says, barely holding back a laugh.

"Takes one to know one, chief," Richie says, barely intelligible through a mouthful of chocolate. "You gave it back to me! What was I supposed to do with it, waste perfectly good chocolate?"

Eddie shrugs, flopping over with his head on Richie's lap, the way that Richie always says is annoying but that he doesn't do anything to stop. "I

dunno. I could have mono or something.”

“You don't have mono, Eddie. Unless you're like, talking about the number of brain cells you have--”

“Oh, fuck off, Richie.”

Richie lets out a little mock gasp. “Did little Eddie Kaspbrak just use the f-bomb? I'm gonna tell your mom, she's gonna wanna put it in your baby book!”

“I swear all the time!”

“Say ‘bullshit.’”

“I'm not gonna say that one, it's gross.”

“Your honor, I rest my case.”

He expects Richie to tell everyone, to turn this unexpected weak spot into something the rest of the world can use against him. But it stays a secret, something they hold between them, for the long and empty afternoons that they can only fill with laughter.



Summer finally dissolves into the cool air and gray skies of fall. Campus slowly turns into a riot of orange and yellow leaves, rustling in the wind like they're whispering to themselves.

Not that Eddie gets to see any of these things much. He's spending every spare minute in the library, or at his desk in Richie's apartment. There's so much work to do, and barely enough hours in the week to do it all.

Richie doesn't seem to mind that Eddie's actually kind of a terrible boyfriend. He seems happy enough that he's there at all. He even helps as much as he can, putting on pot after pot of coffee, replacing Eddie's highlighters when they run out of ink, quizzing Eddie for his

midterms in a frighteningly accurate Alex Trebek impression. When all his papers start to come due, Richie locates, through mysterious means, a portable typewriter for him to use at the apartment. "So you can like... get more done here, you know?"

That panicked feeling in Eddie's chest winds tighter and tighter.

He agrees to go back to Queens for Thanksgiving break. It's a calculated move on his part-- maybe if he doesn't run away from that, he won't be trapped as long for winter break. His mother is over the moon about it, brings it up in every call. He smiles back at her out of habit, even though she can't see him over the phone. He knows that's what he's supposed to do.

"I'll see you next Wednesday night, of course."

"Yeah, Mom. I'll be there."

"I love you, Eddie."

He pauses a second too long on this cue, his jaw clenched so tight it hurts.

"Eddie?"

"Love you too, Mom. I... I gotta go, class is starting soon."

The ache doesn't go away when he hangs up. It doesn't go away at all.



The invitation is a rainbow of dizzying colors, spelling out these perfectly impossible words: "You're Invited To Richard's 8th Birthday!"

Richie gave the first two invitations to Eddie and Stan, and Eddie carried his home like precious cargo, held carefully in his hands so it wouldn't bend or crinkle in his backpack.

His mother examines it like a convincing but ultimately imperfect forgery. "I'll think about it," she says finally, setting it aside.

Eddie nods eagerly, not daring to say anything and risk tipping the balance.

When she isn't looking, he tucks the invitation into the frame of her mirror, so she'll catch a glimpse of it every day and keep thinking about it.

A week before the party, Richie is bouncing off the walls with excitement at school, telling Stan and Eddie over and over again about what a great party it's going to be. Eddie never wants him to stop smiling like that, or to take his arms from where they're slung around his shoulders.

That night, with three days to go before the party, as they're watching TV, his mother presses her palm against his forehead, her brow wrinkled with concern. Eddie's heart drops into his stomach.

"Eddie, love, I think you're running a fever."

"I feel fine! It's probably just warm in here."

She takes him into the bathroom and takes her kit out of the cabinet, the one that rattles with the promise of days spent resting up in bed, quiet as a doll. "Mom..."

"Sit down, Eddie."

"Mom, I feel fine!"

"You're burning up, your cheeks are all red, Eddie bear--"

"I think I'm just tired, I need to go to bed," he says, backing away towards the door. But he knows that if he's bargaining like this, he's already in a precarious position.

"Take your medicine, Eddie--"

His jaw locks up tight, and he shakes his head.

"Eddie, do you really want this to get worse? You know how you get--"

"Mom, I feel fine, I really do," he says again, his voice getting louder and angrier despite himself. He knows better than to assert that he might be well. He learned that lesson a long time ago.

They don't have shouting matches. That's not their style. It draws the wrong kind of attention. Their power struggles are silent and heavy with the things they hold back inside themselves, the secrets too heavy for one person to bear.

Eddie won't take the medicine she offers, the charms to ward off the dangers that only she can see this time. He'll keep his jaw locked up like this forever if it stops this. Maybe he can live forever in the quiet he chooses for himself.

Her fingers are locked just as tightly on his jaw, threatening bruises of their own. When she lets go and leaves the bathroom, he thinks for one foolish, giddy second that he's won this time, that he'll be allowed to stay well.

Then he hears the crumple of paper from her room. He follows her just in time to see the invitation land in the trash, a little riot of color against the gray plastic liner. "Mom, please..."

"You're not going. That boy's no good anyway."

Eddie goes silent, his jaw clenched tight again as he bites down on the rage at the injustice of it all, looking anywhere but her. Her expression softens behind those thick glasses, and she places a fingertip under his chin, gently tilting his head to look up at her. "You need your rest, honey. You know how you get when you're not feeling well. Come on."

He stays silent, as if that's some kind of punishment for her and not the order of things in the Kaspbrak house.



There isn't time that week for him to go to Richie's apartment, so he stops at the diner on the way to the bus stop, like they agreed. It's pretty dead in there, just one other table occupied, the booth right over the partition from the grill. There's a family sitting there, two exhausted parents and a pair of chubby cheeked elementary schoolers in matching red jackets, laughing as Richie entertains them. Eddie hangs back and just watches, sliding into the booth behind theirs. He

can't hold back the fond smile on his lips as Richie hams it up for the kids, all knock knock jokes and silly stunts.

“Can you juggle?”

“No, but I can try. It's how I end up making most of my omelettes. If I drop em on the grill, I'm halfway done.”

“Can I get some whipped cream for my hot cocoa?”

Richie points at the little girl with finger guns. “Sure thing, buddy. Lemme just get some out of the basement.”

With a theatrical flourish, he walks down some imaginary stairs until he disappears out of sight, the kids laughing hysterically the entire time. Even their parents manage some tired smiles.

Richie is a natural. He's good at this. He belongs here, in any spotlight he can get. When Eddie closes his eyes, he can see Richie up on a stage somewhere, making a whole arena's worth of people laugh. He wants that for him, more than almost anything in the world.

When Richie emerges, handing a canister of whipped cream over the partition, he catches sight of Eddie and flashes him a crooked smile.

For just a moment, something uncoils in Eddie's chest, and he breathes in deep the smell of burnt coffee and fried food, trying to press this moment between the pages of his memory and preserve them like a flower. It seems so important, and he's not sure why.

The family packs up, and Richie waves them off. “Have a good trip up to Milwaukee, okay?”

“We'll try!”

Richie walks over to Eddie's booth. “Hey. You hungry?”

“Nah, I already ate. And my bus leaves pretty soon.”

Richie calls over his shoulder to someone Eddie can't see. “Charlie, I'm taking my smoke break. Back in fifteen.”

Then he's out from behind the counter, opening the door for him. The streets are quiet, only the occasional car rumbling past on their way out of town. Everyone's going home. Eddie wishes he was too.

The street light over the bus stop is out, so they're waiting for the bus in the dark. Eddie wills it not to come, to wait here for as long as they can.

"Hey, Eds?"

"Yeah, Richie?"

"I've... I've got something for you." As he says it, he takes his hand. For a moment, Eddie is startled-- they may be on a dark and empty street, but this still seems like too much. Then he feels the little piece of metal in his hand.

"I thought maybe you could use a key? In case I'm ever, you know, at a gig or something when you need a quiet place to study."

"Richie, you don't have to..."

"Or if you forget something, you can just come in, or... if you just want to, I guess," he says, something nervous in that crooked smile. Eddie doesn't know what else to say, so he quickly leans up and presses a kiss to Richie's cheek.

"Thanks, Richie."

"Don't mention it, Eddie Spaghetti."

The bus rolls into the stop with a screeching sigh, and Richie pulls him into a hug. "Have a good trip, okay?"

"I'll try."

Richie chases the bus up to the diner door, where he lingers until the bus is out of sight. Eddie doesn't even take his book out of his bag. He just watches the highways wind along towards New York, rubbing his thumb along the contours of the key. It feels so heavy and light at the same time. He keeps it clutched in his fist, unwilling to let go of it.

He's still holding it when he lets himself into the apartment in the early morning. The air here is so still and suffocating. His mother is waiting for him at the kitchen table.

In her hand, she holds a postcard.

“We need to talk.”

Notes for the Chapter:

sorry. about, you know..... all this.

xoxo, kitsch

18. Chapter 18

Notes for the Chapter:

suggested listening: "sleep on the floor" by the lumineers.

two more finals until i'm done for the semester. i'm so excited to have some time to focus on this.

thanks as always for your patience and support!
sorry for the anguish of that cliffhanger, friends.
hopefully this makes up for it?

Richie can be a really good boyfriend sometimes, if he says so himself. Granted, given the bar that seems to be set in that arena more generally, that's not hard to do. But he likes to think he clears it with a flourish and really sticks the landing.

Take this Thanksgiving break, for example. Richie isn't an idiot. He knows Eddie isn't excited to go back home, and the break isn't long enough for them to write back and forth much, but that doesn't mean Richie can't send something ahead to make Eddie smile, maybe even laugh out loud. He's done some calculations (and pestered the mailman who usually stops in for breakfast in his morning route) and figured it'll take about three days for something to make it from here to New York.

The postcard he picked out is of a slate gray stormy sky over the lake, with some corny slogan over it: *Don't Like The Weather? JUST WAIT A MINUTE, It'll Change.*

He ponders the card for a moment in the back of The Ugly Mug, doodling on the letters and adding an ellipsis to make it the tagline of a cheesy horror movie and not the kind of hacky bullshit people bring to t-shirt kiosks and open mic nights.

He glances up to see the *Army of Darkness* poster someone pinned to the door, with a photo of Deb's unsmiling face pasted over Bruce Campbell's. He's not sure what the joke is supposed to be there, but it

sparks something in his brain.

Richie sketches Eddie, standing in the center of the postcard, his chest out, a grim but determined smile on his face, the one he usually has about halfway through a difficult assignment. In his hand, he has some weird weapon-- a sword, maybe, or a club. It looks more like one of the posts from an old fashioned wrought iron fence than either of those two things, but hey, Richie never claimed to be an artist.

He draws himself down over on Eddie's right, in the classic damsel pose, wearing that goofy ass getup from Chrissie's movie, headband and all, his hand resting on Eddie's upper thigh as he stares up at him adoringly, apparently unaware of the zombie horde that's been drawn behind them.

Lou grins looking at it, shaking her head. "He hasn't even left yet. How are you already this horny?"

"You got a dirty mind, Lou. I'm just a humble artist, led by my muse."

"I'm surprised you didn't make him Han Solo and put yourself in a gold bikini," she says, handing back the postcard.

He flips her off and tucks the carefully in his pocket. "Gold isn't my color. And go fuck yourself."

"You give him the key yet?"

Richie freezes at the door of her apartment. "Uh... not yet."

"Dude. You got it like a month ago."

"Just waiting for the right time, I guess," he says with a sheepish grin and a shrug. "I gotta go. Catch you tomorrow," he mumbles, fleeing out the door before she can pry more.

He sends the card with a day to spare, just in case. It might be the first time in his whole stupid life he's ever done anything early.



Hey Eds!

Chrissie asked me to draw a poster for the movie. this didn't make the cut for some reason? personally, I think some creative editing could make you the hero instead of me, but she didn't like that note.

I miss you. I know you'll be back soon and all, so it's kind of dumb, but hey. I do.

xo, R

ps: don't ask me what you're supposed to be holding-- I think I tried to draw a sword and then forgot what the fuck I was doing, if I even knew in the first place.

ps 2: hey, remind me when you get back about a key.

ps 3: unless I already gave it to you?? sorry, Eds, I'm a mess.



On Thanksgiving, Richie is just knocking around his apartment, drifting between comic books and half finished projects. He ends up on his couch, bouncing a rubber ball off the ceiling and the walls.

He's relieved when the phone rings. Anything to break up the monotony of this day off. He drops his voice low and sultry, with a little bit of Texas twang, the auditory equivalent of fluttering eyelashes. "Hey there, cowboy. Welcome to Rod's Rowdy Rodeo. Pony up that Visa or MasterCard number and get ready for the ride of your life--"

Eddie's voice is low and quiet over the line, something brittle in the sound. "Hi, Richie."

He drops the voice right away, grinning as he relaxes against the sofa. "Hey, Spaghetti Head! How's your Thanksgiving going?"

The sound that comes over the line is somewhere between a sigh and

a laugh. "I don't... I don't know, Richie."

"Eddie, what's wrong?"

"My mom found that postcard you sent. She knows about us now. She won't let me come back."

In his head, Richie can hear Stan's voice over the sound of breaking glass, heavy with exhaustion and disappointment-- *why do you always have to wreck everything?* The guilt settles down deep in his bones, like it never left. "Fuck, Eddie, I-- I'm so sorry--"

"It's okay, Richie." But his voice is so flat, so dead, and Richie doesn't think anything will ever be okay again. "I just... I wanted to tell you. I didn't want you to think I disappeared. Or forgot you again."

"Eddie, do you want to stay?"

There's a long silence on the line. "Jesus, Richie, of course I fucking don't. But she won't let me--"

"Cause I meant what I said. Any time you want to run... I'll come get you, I promise."

There's a long pause, and Eddie's voice is almost too soft to hear when it comes down the line. "Don't make promises like that."

"Hey, call it whatever you want. But I'll be there. You don't have to stay there. I'm not leaving you with her."

On the other end, Eddie snuffles faintly into the line. The sound does nothing to alleviate the leaden weight of the guilt on Richie's shoulders. "Okay, Richie." His voice changes, more solid and normal even as it grows far away, like he's holding the phone away from his mouth as he calls to someone at the other end. "Be out in a second, Aunt Linda." There's the sound of running water in the background as Eddie comes back, his voice quiet again. "I have to go."

"Pack a bag, okay, Eds? I'm on my way."

When the line goes dead, Richie is frozen on his couch for a moment, his brain tying itself in knots over what to do. The bus won't get him

there fast enough, and there's too many opportunities for Eddie's mom to intercept them on the way back.

He throws some clothes and a toothbrush into his backpack and bolts for Lou's apartment, pounding on the door. It's Chrissie who answers, still in her pajamas at 2 pm. "Morning, Richie."

"Is Lou here? I need to borrow her truck."

"Lou's in Cleveland visiting her dad. Why?"

Richie runs a hand through his hair, trying to calm his brain enough to think. "Fuck."

"Richie, what's wrong?"

"It's Eddie. His mom found out about us, and she's not letting him come back. I'm not--- I have to go get him."

Chrissie nods slowly, her jaw set. There's a hardness there, like the scar tissue over an old wound. Richie wonders for the first time why Chrissie didn't go home for the break. Then she waves him into the apartment. "I can be ready in ten. We'll take my Jeep," she calls, as she goes down the hall to the bedroom.

"You don't-- I can just borrow it, you don't have to do that--"

"Don't be dumb. I want to help. Besides, you get nervous at four way stops. You don't wanna deal with New York traffic, trust me."

"And you do?"

She pokes her head out of the doorway, grinning. "My dad says I don't have the common sense to be afraid of anything. I choose to embrace it." Richie looks at the ringlets of golden brown hair haloed around her head and her shatterproof smile, and he thinks of Beverly Marsh, taking a running leap into the quarry.

She fully emerges a few minutes later, holding a duffel bag and a road atlas. "Let's go."

Her Jeep is messy, filled with miscellaneous junk in the back. She

shoves aside one of Lou's Pizza Palace baseball caps to make room for Richie in the passenger seat and hands him the map. "You're my navigator."

"I can do that," Richie says, unfolding it and tracing out a route to New York.

"We'll have to stop somewhere closer and get a city map. You know his address, right?"

Richie nods. He learned it by heart over the summer, wrote it so many times on so many postcards. He runs a hand through his hair again, looks out at the road ahead.

Chrissie drives fast, and the roads blur past in a meaningless smear of chain restaurants and gas stations. Richie counts off exit signs and imagines Eddie in the seat between them, heading the other way, into the kind of life he doesn't have to run away from, the kind he deserves.

It's the least Richie can do, after blowing his life up for a stupid joke.

Dark has started to settle over the interstate by the time they get on I-80. "Looks like we pretty much stay here until we see signs for New York."

"Sounds good. You're a good navigator, Scotty."

"Scotty's the engineer, not the navigator," Richie says, without even having to think about it. Somehow, that managed to sink in, in all the hours he spent ribbing Eddie about Star Trek while he was crashing on the floor of his dorm room, trying not to let his disaster area of a life overwhelm Eddie's. "I'm not even sure that navigators are even a thing on that show. I think the ship computer might do it or something.."

"Nerd," Chrissie says, changing lanes to pass a semi going too slowly for her taste.

"I learned from the best."

He leans his head against the window and watches the neon riot of

some Pennsylvania miracle mile disappear into dark and quiet hills.

At some point between Brooksville and Wilkes-Barre, he manages to fall into a fitful sleep.



The dream is strangely familiar, but Richie can't place why. He's thirteen again, standing in a dark room, one that stinks of stillness and neglect and a wet, foul reek of decay underneath it all. It's cluttered with strange dolls whose face Richie can't seem to bring into focus.

There's a small coffin in front of him, one Richie doesn't want to open, but his hands lift the lid anyway, even as he wants to scream at them to stop.

His hands go to his hair, knotting there in his confusion. There's another doll against the white satin of the coffin lining, pale porcelain crowned with messy dark hair, wearing a smaller version of that Freese's Department Store t-shirt he wore to pieces, ugly Army surplus glasses...

It's Richie in miniature, with one change-- its lips have been sewn shut in neat, even stitches.

"Isn't he cute?"

Richie turns to see Eddie, standing there just behind him, like a shining beacon in all this decay and confusion. He rushes towards him, reaching out for his wrist. "Eddie, we gotta get out of here, it's not..."

But Eddie walks past him, towards that coffin and the terrible, perfect doll. He tousles its synthetic hair, strokes a hand down its smooth porcelain cheek. "Eddie, Eddie, don't..."

His voice dies in his throat as Eddie picks it up and holds it like a ventriloquist's dummy, even resting his cheek on top of its head for a moment, smiling at Richie, a bright grin that the doll can't hope to match. For a moment, Richie notices a strange silver shine to Eddie's eyes, but it flickers and vanishes like a trick of the light. He wants more than anything for Eddie to put that awful, unclean thing down so they can leave.

Eddie runs a finger along the stitches of its mouth. "Look, they even made

improvements. Someone finally found a way to shut the Trashmouth up.”

Richie can feel his face growing hot with that feverish shame at hearing the second worst name he gets called coming from his friend’s mouth. “Eddie, put it down, we have to go...”

The other boy’s lower lip sticks out in a pout, the way he always insists he doesn’t, the way Richie can’t stop staring at. “You don’t like it? That’s a shame. I think I like you better this way. I think everybody does.”

Richie’s voice is a whimper as he reaches out for Eddie, even as the other boy breaks into a grin, as something black and viscous pours out his mouth and down his chin, as the doll’s porcelain comes alive with maggots. “Eddie...”

That silver shine is back in Eddie’s eyes, and Richie realizes too late that this isn’t really Eddie. The thought is no comfort as it bears down on him, holding out a rusty needle and a spool of coarse black thread.



Richie wakes up with a bad taste in the back of his throat, the dream already dissolving into fragments. He rubs at his eyes as Chrissie climbs back into the car, a cup of coffee in one hand and a map in the other. “Hey! You’re awake!”

“Where are we,” he mumbles, glancing around at the brightly lit gas station without finding an answer.

“New Jersey. We’re making good time. I think we’ll be there before midnight. You gotta be navigator again, though.”

“Aye aye, captain,” Richie says, taking the city map to plot out another route.

He gets them lost twice once they actually get to Queens, but they still pull up beside a squat, red brick apartment building a bit before midnight. It looks ordinary enough, but Richie still feels a little sick looking at it, imagining Eddie trapped somewhere in those plain

brick walls.

“Do you think he's home?”

Richie shrugs. “I think so. His mom doesn't like to be out too late.”

“So how are we gonna get him out?”

“I don't... I don't know. I was gonna start chucking pebbles at windows until I find him?” he says, laughing without a trace of humor.

“It's a start. We could try ringing the bell. Would she recognize you?”

“Probably. She really fucking hated me, when we were kids.”

Chrissie stares thoughtfully up at the building for a moment, then twists around in the driver's seat, digging around for something in the back.

“What are you doing?”

“A distraction,” she says as she emerges with Lou's baseball cap and a pizza delivery bag.

“... why do you have that?”

“She borrows my car sometimes, when the truck's acting up. So here's the plan. I'll go hit the buzzer for the apartment. If Eddie comes out, he comes with us. If she comes out, I'll argue with her about the pizza she didn't order while you go figure out which window is Eddie's.”

“How long do you think you can keep that up for?”

“I was on the debate team in another life. I can keep it going for as long as you need me to. Here,” she says, passing him the car keys. Then she crams the hat on her head and walks over to the buzzer at the front of the building. Richie walks over to the side of the building, looking up at the windows by the fire escape. There's one light on the third floor window, and Richie waits for a moment, willing Eddie to come into view in that yellow light.

His boyfriend appears silhouetted against that light, but Richie would know him anywhere, anytime. He waves as casually as he can, waiting to start moving up the fire escape until Eddie mirrors the gesture.

It's all Richie can do not to take the steps two at a time like an overeager kid. He raps gently on the window when he gets there, smiling as bright as he can manage when Eddie slides the window open.

"Hey. You ready to go?"

"You really came," Eddie whispers, his eyes wide and wondering.

"Of course I did," Richie says, resting one hand on the window sill and the other on Eddie's cheek. "That's a Richie Tozier guarantee, baby."

Eddie laughs softly, and he passes his backpack through the window to Richie before climbing out himself. He slides the window almost closed behind him, then holds out a hand to Richie. They creep quietly down the rusty fire escape, pausing just around the corner. Chrissie is still arguing with Mrs. Kaspbrak about the non-existent pizza through the intercom. Richie flashes her a thumbs up, and Eddie waves shyly to her. "All right, you have a great night, and thanks for wasting my time, you cheapskate fuck."

Richie tosses her the keys, and he and Eddie climb into the backseat together, his arm wound around Eddie's shoulders. As they hit the road, Richie can see the dark circles under Eddie's eyes in brief glimpses under the city lights. It looks like he hasn't slept in days. When he slides a hand into Eddie's, he can feel him shaking.

He brings Eddie's hand up, pressing a gentle kiss to his knuckles, then covers it with his other hand, rubbing circles into the back of his palm. "You're okay, Eddie. You're gonna be okay."

Eddie doesn't answer, but he shifts around in the back seat, leaning back against Richie's chest. Richie wraps his arms around Eddie, pressing a kiss to the top of his head.

When they get back on the interstate and leave the city behind them, Eddie's drifted off to sleep, his breathing steady, slow, and calm. Richie lets himself imagine that he's finally done something right.

Notes for the Chapter:

Richie Tozier has never answered the phone normally in his life.